

BEING AFRAID OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Gabriel Motzkin

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The current idea about the world is that humans have exploited it for their own use, and that this human exploitation for use has been deleterious to the environment, i.e. that it has been more damaging than the normal wear and tear the environment would experience from its use by other organisms. This idea is largely a modern idea, since it depends on both the idea that humans consume and change the environment more than do other organisms, and that use by organisms damages the environment. This negative evaluation of environmental use is also based on our ambivalence about the idea that the world is there for our use, i.e. that it exists not for itself but in order to be used by us. The questions arise of whether humans should use the environment at all (which is ultimately tantamount to asking whether humans should exist), and whether use, treating the world instrumentally, is at all legitimate. We are uncomfortable with the idea that we do exploit something which we view as being alive. People who are sated can question whether eating meat is a discretionary activity. But to this discomfort there is added the somewhat modern idea that while the world is indeed there for our use, it is there for a very special kind of use, namely that it is there to be enjoyed *aesthetically* by us, as if we could observe the world from afar

without changing it. Thus the distinguishable ideas that the world should be enjoyed aesthetically and that it should not be consumed or used are fused into the idea that our main duty with respect to the environment is to preserve it.

These kinds of intuition are common among what one might term elites, but they are not the most common explicitly stated ideas in the polemics about the environment. They may inform those polemics, but the explicit argument that is made is quite different. The most prevalent argument for preserving the environment is that future humans should be able to use it in largely the same way as we allegedly use it. That is what sustainability means; sustainability appears to refer to the idea that the world should be allowed to survive, but the hidden message is that the world is like an agricultural field, and we want it to deliver crops in the future as well. This argument of sustainability accepts our instrumental relation to the world, but it also contains the tacit presupposition that something like moderate use of the environment, i.e. that sustainable development is possible. In that sense, this human argument is anthropocentric, while making some assumptions about the malleability of human nature that need to be tested. Against this point of view, one could argue that what humans need to do is to exploit the environment ruthlessly, thus hastening their extinction, and the environment could recover sooner than it will if it is continually pestered by humans who ultimately seek to create, under

whatever assumptions, an environment in their own image. Behind the various positions, there is then less difference than at first appears between aestheticists and instrumentalists, for both are anthropocentric. But can humans really attend to a world that is not in their own image?

The currently fashionable idea of sustainable development contains two presuppositions about time and history. The first assumption is that future time is open-ended. We can affect now how we will live in that future time, or even whether we will live, but there is no finite moment in the future where everything must end. In that sense, the idea that the environment must be protected in the future is both an optimistic idea, because we can affect the future positively, and it is also a secular idea, at least in comparison to the Abrahamic religions, which all believe in the end of days, with quite serious consequences for their conceptions of the worth of the environment. The second presupposition underpinning sustainable development is not logically necessary, but it is quite popular. This presupposition is one about past history: it is the idea that people in the past somehow affected the environment less than we do.

Of course, both of these presuppositions are wrong. However, they are wrong in different ways. Our idea about the future is ultimately wrong. However, it is not wrong in the near term, and we believe that the possibility of affecting our environment positively in the near term is all we need. It is even difficult for us to think in the comparatively near term of fifty years.

To be told that the world will eventually come to an end has no meaning for us. Moreover, at least at present, we do not see what we can do to avoid this outcome. From that very long point of view, the best thing we could do would be to begin now to work hard to establish space colonies (if we succeed in establishing space colonies, what happens to mother earth will become a secondary issue). It does not seem to me that anybody is taking this idea seriously, and in that sense we are still bound to this earth as our environment.

However, even on this earth, it may also be that a positive effect in the near term can turn out to be a negative one in a longer term. The history of the environment is replete with such examples, where improvement ultimately meant deterioration. Nonetheless, our evolutionary hardware is such that we can only struggle to get through in the near term. One cannot really fault the hunter who killed the last mammoth if that was going to be the only way in which his family would survive.

In contrast, our idea about the past, namely that somehow people did better with the environment in the past, is dangerously wrong. It took people a long, long time to figure out how to farm without exhausting the soil. Certainly the history of the human race is the history of a contest between the human capacity to pollute any close environment to a dangerous level, and nature's own recuperative powers. Moreover, it may well be that some pollution was necessary for the survival of the human race. Again, if I heat

my home to the minimum necessary for survival, but in the process release dangerous elements into my environment, I will always choose to heat my home to at least that minimum. The weaker argument is sometimes heard that human beings did less damage to the environment because they did not have the same capacity to inflict as much damage as we do. This argument is dangerous nonsense. Human beings have always transformed the environment they encountered, and they have changed it permanently since human beings were able to do so. Humans hunted most of the great mammals to extinction; once they mastered agriculture they destroyed forests wherever they went, causing both erosion and climate change; their animals changed environments radically, eating everything in their path, one major cause of nomadism. In short, the industrial revolution is only the latest stage in the human revolution. In evolutionary terms, what the human revolution reflects is that any animal at the top of the food chain will extract what it can from the environment, not what it must extract in order to survive. Ultimately, Malthus was right. However, in the short term, it may not just be population pressure that drives this possibly creative destruction. It may be inferred that while evolution operates through minimal change, the animals that are the subjects of evolution try to change as much as they possibly can; from their point of view their collective hunger is infinite. Evolutionary adaptation may proceed by minimal steps, but selection pressures are always experienced by the relevant population of organisms as

being maximal. Locusts, dogs and humans all seek to maximize their welfare rather than to get by with minimum consumption.

Why do animals, and especially humans, constantly seek to extract the maximum from their environment, thereby transforming it? The reason is obvious: uncertainty. The human effort with respect to the environment first of all stems from fear. Fear, like all emotions, cannot be precisely described through language. It may well be that there are different kinds of fear, different emotions of fear, just as there are different kinds of uncertainty. It may well be that the only way to vanquish uncertainty is through addressing its cause, but if an uncertainty is sensed to be intractable, then human beings have devised ways of dealing with their emotions of uncertainty. The two major ways in which humans address their irresolvable uncertainties are religion, and control. The first stage of control is wandering from place to place, the next is storage, and the third is the transformation of nature. Indeed, since storage probably preceded the transformation of nature, it may be that the agricultural revolution had its origin in places where food was stored. Storage is already both control and transformation, since it enables the deferment of consumption. In the first two stages of control, nomadism and storage, there can be no such thing as excess. In the third stage, however, it is not clear that there is or can be any limit to transformation.

But my point is something else: in all three cases, nature is not viewed as a friend, but rather as an enemy. First, there are the other hostile animals,

including other humans, who are the most threatening hostile animals of all. Second, there is the idea that the non-animal natural world itself is dangerous, whether because of the weather, or because it is tricky to walk around a disorganized world, or because it at first seems awesomely silent. It is that non-articulated threat that needs to be vanquished, and it cannot be vanquished through love. In this regard, from the beginning, humans distinguished between other animals and everything else, and they were afraid of them in different ways. We can conceive of this in a different way: when Kant opines that humans are by nature evil, he does not explain why humans are evil. But if nature itself is the prime enemy, then it becomes the human task to be evil with respect to nature. It is a natural human drive to seek to exploit, to control, and ultimately to destroy nature. Industrial economies are merely expressions of this human interest in vanquishing enemies.

Boethius thought that evil is the ordinary condition, and good is the strange miracle. However, he did not think that nature is inherently evil. That is because he did not feel threatened by nature, but rather much more by other human beings. Once nature is no longer threatening, we can relocate the source of evil intentions, and the fear we feel in the face of such evil intentions, to other human beings. So our conception of evil depends on a fundamental revision of our attitude with respect to nature, because nature does not threaten us in the short-term. For animals that cannot think beyond

an immediate future the normal condition in life is to be threatened. We need to think about how this relocation of the source of evil changes our conception of it, how radical evil is only possible once it is no longer natural evil.

How did humans emerge from this situation of being threatened by the very world on which they were dependent? They did so in two steps: first, the control of the immediate environment, and then, second, its neutralization through creating a distance between humans and the environment. We know how human control of nature was achieved: control was achieved through tool-making. The origin of tools lies in the idea that tools are things to be thrown; humans are the only primates who can aim and throw accurately. All tools are based on these capacities for accuracy and for replication of that accuracy. But throwing also makes it possible to injure an animal or an enemy by creating a distance between the agent and the enemy. Tools require the following: distance between the agent and the object, and making the tools through a rigid series of steps and procedures that cannot be reverse engineered from the final product: we can know the conditions for a tool-making instrument, but if we did not know what a hand looked like, we could not grasp the outline of the hand from the stone arrowhead. In sum, creating such a distance requires objectification, conceiving an object from which one is detached. In this way, nature's threat is neutralized through the

double process of objectification: regarding the target as an objective, and making an objective tool to hit that target.

The second step seems to us to be even more remarkable: it is the creation of a system of communication for making the tools and for learning how to use them. Many theorists think that this system of communication was created in terms of the relations between humans. My suggestion is that one reason that impelled humans to look for a system of communication was to neutralize nature, to create a distance between the agent and nature so that the agent could better manipulate his environment. That system is language. Noam Chomsky has pointed out that there are not enough stimuli in the child's environment that could explain how the child could learn language. Others have tried to imagine how language could evolve in terms of what biological modifications are necessary for the development of the capacity for language. It seems obvious to all that language has a selective advantage. In fact, language shows how a selective process is much more evolutionarily rapid than an adaptive one. Yet what could prove profitable for us is to think about why language becomes such an absolute demand or requirement, i.e. it is the environment is doing the selecting for language, and not just the social dynamics of the human group.

Let us try to be precise: language not only facilitates the systematic organization of the world. It also creates a filter between the organism and the world, since a language-enabled being tends to first put his reactions and

initiatives with respect to the world into some form of language before he acts. Representing the world through linguistic expression means the creation of a distance between the organism and the world so that the organism can grasp the world as its own simulacrum. That distance does not create the agent's relation of hostility to the world; that distance is rather an attempt to overcome the agent's fear of the world's hostility to him. Yet when modern people began to allow themselves to like nature, they thought of trying to overcome the distance that their desire for survival through control has created between humans and nature, rather than of dispensing with the tools they had made in order to create that distance. People who love the environment do not give up on language and on tools.

The most naturally protected environment for humans is not the city. It is precisely urban inhabitants who are quite helpless with respect to nature. They live in an environment in which they have maximized their distance from nature, and therefore they have no direct strategies for manipulating nature. It was with some astonishment that people learned a generation ago that their consumption of fossil fuels may be as it were unsafe for the environment, both because they had not thought about the environment's need for protection, and they also thought no longer about their need for protection from the environment. It would seem that the best way to achieve both results would be to isolate human beings from the

environment. The logic of urban culture is that both the world and human beings are safer when they have less to do with each other.

The question we should ask is whether such ever more urbanized humans have lost their fear of nature, or whether some fear of nature still permeates their being? My answer will be that while urban humans cannot have lost their fear of nature, urban culture has altered the way that fear works on people. If humans had really lost their fear of nature, then appeals based on that fear would no longer affect them. But what humans have lost is their awareness of their own fear of nature. The aestheticization of nature depends on suppressing our natural fear of nature. That aestheticization makes it possible to lose one's fear of nature as an idea, indeed to such a degree that henceforth all relations with nature require first posing nature as an idea rather than as an experience. It is an expression of that sentimental view of nature when we are told, while taking a trip, that we are now in a beautiful place, or are seeing a striking landscape. We do not conceive of that landscape, of what we are seeing as a permutation of our vision, but as something that is objectively pleasing, or beautiful, or sublime. In all these cases, we have distanced ourselves from what we are perceiving by first contemplating the idea of the object as a reflection of our consciousness, and only then do we permit ourselves to enjoy it. It is this essential step of transforming the object into an idea that has made it possible for us to lose our fear. In that case, what we are experiencing when we experience the

beauty of nature is not nature, but rather the kind of experience we have set as our a priori experience of nature through a psychological operation on ourselves. However, it should be pointed out that we can still have a fear that we attach an idea. But that fear is then an abstract fear: I am afraid of global warming in general, not of how it will affect me specifically.

To the question of whether such a psychological operation really does away with our fear of nature, my answer is no. If our self-operation has transformed our apprehension of nature, it has rendered our fear of it more diffuse and general in such a way that we can even reach the state in which we do not know what it is we are afraid of, but we still have a general sense of apprehension. Is that general sense of apprehension there because we no longer have the object in front of us, because our fear is no longer specific? We could intuit that even humans in the prehistoric environment possessed a general sense of apprehension. However, one could also imagine that this general sense of apprehension was related to their specific fears. I would like to argue that we generalize in a different way than they did. Here where Kant helps us. For us, the loss of the ability to attribute our fear to a specific cause has been replaced by an aesthetic sense of the world: our anxiety no longer appears as an anxiety in the face of nature, but as a cosmic or a psychological anxiety. We are afraid of both much more than nature, and of much less than nature, of the cosmos and of ourselves. In both cases, what we have is an aestheticized fear, a fear that is a fear both of the external

world and of our own consciousness of that world, without being able to attach it to any cause or object. Unlike Heidegger, I think that this situation is one that characterizes our culture, and not the human condition as such.

We then can reattach such an aestheticized general fear to the environment, but as stated, it will be something quite different from the general fear of our primitive forebears because we have conceived what we should be afraid of before we actually feel afraid of it. Rather than fear stimulating an image or a concept, in this case, it is the image or the concept that stimulates the fear. Hence the object that it creates is not the natural object, but the intended object of this sublimated fear. For our ancestors, because nature could be specifically dangerous at any moment, they therefore developed a rationality in dealing with their hostile environment. In contrast, we are irrationally afraid. We are afraid because we have no idea of how nature can be dangerous, except insofar as we have experienced the terrors of nature on television, i.e. as stories and as depictions. It is this lack of specific fear that makes us generally apprehensive. We do not believe that nature in general is hostile, and because we do not believe that nature is inherently hostile, its occasional hostility seems to us to be irrational, which is not what pre-modern people thought. For them, natural catastrophes had a reason (perhaps we are now returning to that thought in a scientific guise). In turn, insofar as we sense that we are afraid of nature, unlike our forebears, we think we are being irrational. And in turn, we seek to compensate for and

conquer our own irrationality through technology, as if an external tool can be effective in dealing with our subjective sense of irrationality. I want to make this clear: primitive man was not irrationally afraid. Our criticism of the primitive is not that they were irrational in our sense, but that their rationality was irrational, i.e. that they were mistaken in their analysis of the situation. In contrast, we are conflicted between two different ideas of irrationality: 1. Nature has its own rationality, which we have irrationally offended. In that sense, it is our rational behavior, e.g. consuming oil, which is irrational. 2. The situation is inherently irrational. We are just as afraid as the primitives were, but because we are distanced from the object of our fear, we feel that we are being absolutely irrational when we are afraid. This kind of absolute irrationality has the following consequence: Of ourselves, we then have no psychological equipment to deal with the very fear that we have psychologized. It is then because we do not possess any internal standard for evaluating our fear that we create an external way of dealing with it, i.e. we substitute a technological conception of technology for our rational reflection, since it was our rational reflection that made it seem, as it does for Kant, that our fears are absolutely irrational. Technology is the response then to our sense of absolute irrationality. The reason is obvious: our fears are not irrational, but they have no object, since normally we never find ourselves in a situation in which we have to fear the environment. Technology has freed us from the environment and from our specific fear of

the environment, but not from our general fear of an environment. Lacking that immediate fear, we defer the fear, and swallow up stories, possibly true stories, about the catastrophes that are about to happen, but which we do not have to deal with right now. That the psychological basis for our fear of impending but not immediate catastrophes is irrational does not mean that the catastrophes won't happen. What it means is that contemplating the catastrophe that may happen in fifty years appears to synthesize our technological and rational abilities to predict with our seemingly irrational fears about the inherently unknown future. The prediction of a future catastrophe may be correct, but it has no inherent relation to the emotion it stimulates in the person who is apprised of that prediction.

So we can say that in a sense we are more afraid of nature than our ancestors because we are less hostile towards nature. However, we cannot say that our fear is anything like their fear, because it is not the fear of someone caught in an earthquake. The question that remains is whether our general fear is a good basis for either judgment or action. Our ancestors' fear was an excellent basis for judgment and action: they survived and succeeded. Never mind the damage they inflicted on the environment, which was severe, never mind the great catastrophes that befell the human race as a consequence of their environmentally damaging behavior. Of course, that success was global, and not local. Humans as a whole survived, but the odds

were against any specific group of humans surviving. Human strategies were local, and a very few of those local strategies worked.

Our general fear, in contrast, looks absurd for two reasons: 1. It has aesthetic overtones. We regret the damage that we inflict on the environment for its own sake, without asking ourselves whether the benefit of inflicting that damage is good for us. The reason is that we assume that any damage done to the environment is bad. 2. Our general fear impels us to formulate a global strategy rather than local strategies. The argument for a global environmental strategy is that our world is too complex, we know too much about the many interactions between different parts of the globe so that local strategies can be effective. This argument is weighty, for it may look absurd but still be right. It looks absurd because it does not answer any specific need but balances different needs.

I would like to argue that this strategy is mistaken. Here are my reasons: 1. A global strategy is one strategy. What if we are wrong? In an ideal world, it would be good to have one country that takes measures against global warming next to one country that does nothing. In that way we would do what humans have always done: diversify the response in order to find out what works. The reason that this option is impractical is that short-run success by one country or society would make it impossible for the other country or society to continue with its perhaps mistaken strategy. We would eventually reach the unpalatable answer that environmentally cautious

countries should compensate environmental polluters so that the cautious countries could continue their allegedly successful environmental policies. 2. From that response my conclusion can be inferred that it will be very wrong to adopt any global policy whatsoever, a. because we may wrong; and b. because a global policy is one in which the weak have to sustain the even weaker, i.e. in which no country can reap the benefits of its unanticipatedly successful strategy. And from that we infer that the ultimate consequence of environmental decline or catastrophe will be the end of globalization.

3. It therefore follows that in some sense we must return to the wisdom of our ancestors, i.e. that we must be tolerant of different strategies followed in different places so that the human race as a whole will survive – that is, if we agree that the survival of the human race is a good. And if we do agree that the survival of the human race is a good, it follows that nature is not for us an independent player, i.e. that we will always be insecure about the autonomy we will concede to nature. Have no fear, nature can take care of itself. It is not nature that will suffer from mistaken strategies, it is us.

A policy in which different assignments are dictated to people who live in different places is one which requires a different emotional constitution than ours. It means that we will need to get rid of our romantic and aesthetic appreciation of nature, just as we will need to get rid of our merely utilitarian attitude to nature, for both delegitimize our fear of nature. In order to return to a specific fear of a specific nature, which has been the

stimulating constraint on human survival and development, we will need to learn respect for nature in local terms, which means that we will need to learn again to cultivate our specific fears, the kind of fears in our world that farmers tend to have. It is in that sense that the industrial era is over. Our world is caught between two tendencies, the tendency to ever greater application of technology and the tendency to revaluing nature as a force that will always surpass any technology. Our challenge is how to reconcile this conflict between our apprehensiveness in the face of nature and our seemingly unlimited capacity for providing technological answers not only to our problems but also to our fears. My point has been that while we can resolve this problem both in terms of technology and in terms of the way we decide about and allocate resources and assignments in this world, we will do well to pay attention to our own human nature, and learn to respect the emotional equipment with which evolution has provided us in the struggle for survival. That means paying attention to the specific dangers that confront us with an attitude of respect for our specific fears engendered from immediate challenges.