“The problem is not only that human beings produce pollution … human beings are pollution. We are too numerous and too concentrated, consuming all available resources at the expense of other organisms, while we exude lethal toxins into the surrounding environment. We have to learn to live more as commensals; otherwise like a malignant tumor or aggressive infection, we will kill our host.”

This issue’s cover features humanist and farmer Charles Morgan, photographed near his home by our Art Director. Charles has been involved in agriculture and food production from the time he was a young boy working on his grandparents’ farm. His university studies have been widely varied, including agriculture and biology, as well as astrophysics, computing science, mathematics and philosophy. He has published in Journal of Symbolic Logic, Philosophy of Science, Zeitschrift für Mathematische Logik and Artificial Intelligence, and currently teaches logic at the University of Victoria. This is the third in a series of covers showing the many faces of humanism in Canada.
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Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal is a primary sanctuary for the Bengal tiger and the Asian rhinoceros. The park exists because the region used to be too malarious for humans to live there. Following a mosquito eradication program, Nepalis began to move into the region. Nepal has one of the highest birthrates in the world and the park is now surrounded by desperately poor Nepalis who understandably complain that they cannot graze cattle or use the timber in the park. Can the exclusion of impoverished Nepalis from the park be justified to a humanist? Can the interests of tigers and rhinos be allowed to override the most basic needs of human beings?

Humanists have championed focusing human efforts on the well being of humans. They reject after-life and service to God as a basis for human morality. Humans are the only source of the value and the ultimately valuable. This view is politically and morally progressive. One has only to look around the contemporary world to see the hate and misery that is supported by non-humanist, religious perspectives.

But there is a challenge to the humanist perspective found in the green or so called deep ecology movement. The deep ecologists (who of course, coined the loaded terminology) argue that we should not be focusing solely on the well being of human beings. They denigrate what they call the ‘shallow’ ecological position that argues for environmental good on the basis that preserving the environment is in the long-term interest of humans. They claim that that morality must focus on the well being of the earth and all its inhabitants, not just the human species. In addition they suggest that the human species and individual well being will often need to be subordinated to the well being of the greater ecosystem — perhaps even to the greatest ecosystem, Gaia, or the earth. In this perspective value is not given only to humans – not even particularly to humans.

In practice this means arguing for the preservation of wild lands and the tigers for their own sake. The deep ecologist argues that the preservation of the tiger species, unique, rare and beautiful as they are, trumps whatever benefits the local humans might get from taking over the habitat of the tigers. Can the humanist agree? Is the deep ecology perspective merely smug cultural chauvinism of the affluent West that values so-called ‘charismatic mega fauna’ more than humans? Or is the value of the tigers really greater than whatever benefit would come from making the park available to the impoverished Nepalis?

Finding a firm foundation for the assignment of value and weighing of some goods over others is notoriously difficult. Traditionally all western ethical systems, religious or not, have placed humans at the value centre. Perhaps the most successful traditional solution has been Utilitarianism which clearly places aggregate human well being as its fundamental value though in the hand of some of its practitioners (including founder, Jeremy Bentham) value is given to the psychological states of any creature that is sentient (i.e., can suffer).

Utilitarianism is attractive because many of its implications are consistent with our most fundamental moral intuitions. We all recognize that pain and suffering is to be deplored and that those who impose it on other creatures without some adequate justification are doing something wrong. We also recognize that the point of many moral rules, legal rules and even economic systems is to encourage humans to act in ways that promote our collective well being – “the greatest good for the greatest number,” as the famous Utilitarian slogan would have it.

But even if we include animals in our Utilitarian perspective and acknowledge that our obligation to the
well being of sentient creatures also includes at least some future perspective of the deep ecologists. For them, the very organization of the earth, from the climax rain forests of BC to the teeming life of the tropical rain forest of the Amazon, has value. This value is not because these habitats are necessary for the well being of humans or even for the well being of the sentient creatures that inhabit them. Deep ecologists do not deny that nature is ‘red in tooth and claw’ and accept that pain and a certain amount of human misery may well be the price of respecting ecological well-being. Their moral concern is not for the minimization of pain, but respect for the integrity of the ecosystems.

A humanist might argue that such a perspective is unnecessary. Humanity’s failure to properly protect the environment was the result of humans being too short sighted and greedy. An enlightened humanistic utilitarianism would protect the environment for the long-run good of humanity. But for the deep ecologist the issue isn’t simply one of preserving the environment for the long-term interest of humans. Deep ecologists argue that the reason for our environmental problems is not simply short-sightedness but value blindness: western culture has failed to recognize the inherent value possessed by the earth and its ecosystems.

Can the humanist adopt such a perspective? As we all know, science sees a world without value. Various secular efforts to establish the foundation of value have not been successful. This does not and should not stop humans from valuing. We value humans, especially those to whom we are close. We value the freedom and integrity of others. These values are not experienced as arbitrary impositions of taste or mere cultural prejudice. We don’t just dislike slavery as we might lima beans. So while we are hard pressed to defend the basis of value, we do not live our lives as if fundamental values are arbitrary or merely cultural conventions. And we can and often do value the land and its wild creatures.

It has been often noticed that the land has a special place in the consciousness of aboriginal people, but certainly such concern and identification is not limited to them. All cultures have sacred places – some are artifacts of human activity, some are nature’s – there are cathedrals and Cathedral Groves. Often the basis of this sacredness is spiritual and god based, but not necessarily. The oft-quoted spiritual value of nature appears not to require a divine basis. It is just there. You feel it in the quiet of a wood, the awe of a mountain or in the power of a terrible tempest. Humanists need not deny these feelings.

Humanists may be troubled by the fact that a reverence for nature is becoming a kind of ‘religion’ consistent with the science of ecology if not strictly speaking based on it. This religion has its holy places such as the redwood forests or the high Sierras. It has its martyrs in tree sitters, its zealots in Earth Firsters and its bishops in the likes of David Suzuki. Can humanists accept this new ‘religion?’ I would argue that they can and should as long as the factual claims of this ‘religion’ are constrained by science. We need to continue to demand respect for a careful assessment of scientific evidence. But we also need to acknowledge our connection with nature. We need to recognize that such acknowledgement is the basis of an appropriate moral stance towards the environment. While such a view also serves the long-term interests of humanity, this is not its justification. Valuing nature for itself is as fundamental a value as concern for other humans. Just as we have come to recognize that humans properly raised respond to the needs of others with caring and respect, so to do humans raised free of an exploitative ideology respond to nature with caring and respect.

The plight of both the tigers and the Nepalis deserve our concern. But such trade offs are undoubtedly more complex than determining how to maximize human wellbeing. A humanist ethic must give due consideration to the value of nature, not simply the needs of humans now and in the future.

Mark Battersby has taught philosophy at Capilano College, North Vancouver, since 1975. He is interested in encouraging students to become autonomous thinkers, and worked for a number of years with Gary Bauslaugh at the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology attempting to promote curricular change throughout the BC post-secondary system.

This dilemma is based on an article by Holmes Rolston III, one of the most philosophically astute deep ecologists. (1998. “Saving Nature, Feeding People and the Foundations of Ethics.” in Environmental Values 7, edited by Alan Holland. Isle of Harris: White Horse Press.) Many of his articles and a bibliography of his work are available at his website: lamar.colostate.edu/~rolston.
Landscape & Sentiment

silver prints by Gary Wilson
They shut the road though the woods
Seventy years ago,
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road though the woods.
highway house
near Maugerville
Sunbury County
New Brunswick, 1989

abandoned farm
Lake Midway
Digby County
Nova Scotia, 1990

abandoned trestle
Upper Woodstock
Carleton County
New Brunswick, 1991

Text from “The Way Through the Woods” by Rudyard Kipling.

Gary Wilson in an Assistant Professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. These photographs are from Gary’s retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1999.
The date is November 6, 2003. The place is the Unitarian Fellowship of London, Ontario. The principals are Dr Goldwyn Emerson, Professor Emeritus and regular contributor to Humanist in Canada, and Frank Swoboda, pastor and science teacher at an independent (privately-funded) Christian high school. The event is a debate on Evolution vs Creationism in the Science Class. It was organized by Humanists in London and Area, but all were welcome.

Opening the debate with his allotted 15 minute introduction is Frank Swoboda. A charming if somewhat intense man, the pastor allows no doubt in any onlooker’s mind: He believes, unflinchingly, that the Earth was created by the Judeo/Christian God and that our children should know about it.

Surprisingly, Swoboda uses an empirical argument: “To prove things scientifically, you need to have experiments, you need to use your senses.” He admits that micro-evolution exists, but draws the line there. “There is variation within a kind. We have blue eyes here, brown eyes and green eyes. It doesn’t mean that you’re a cat, it simply means that you’re slightly different from me.” Throughout his opening statement and his rebuttal, as well as during the question period, the pastor states that we don’t see “frogs become princes.”

Pastor Swoboda’s belief in holy creation is defended with the argument for design. The universe is just a little too perfect to be an accident. “It’s impossible for things to just happen. You can’t find a computer on the seashore, neither can you simply find a human being. Living things need a creator.”

The First Cause argument is also offered. Swoboda reads from a grade nine textbook, “All life-forms are made up of one or more cells. Cells only arise from pre-existing cells.” Then he adds, “Evolution says that life comes from non-life.”

The audience is asked to consider mathematics: “It’s impossible for us to have these few people, these few animals, on this planet, if this planet’s been around for a million years or more.”

Swoboda finishes in a flurry, “If you want to believe in evolution as your saviour, to save us from our problems in the world, go ahead, but I believe in a creator.”

Dr Emerson takes the floor. He opens by pointing out that there are very few schools which deal with the subject of evolution at all. When it is available for study, it is only as a special curriculum requirement for grade 12 biology students who are in the university stream. “Worse still, some teachers, including some science teachers, fail to understand the theory themselves… On the other hand, there are many opportunities for teachers to reinforce creationist views without formally teaching creationism, per se.” Considering this, Emerson concludes that “creationists’ calls for equal treatment and equal time for both views have a rather shallow ring to them.”

In response to Pastor Swoboda’s empirical angle, Emerson says: “Considering the heavy burden of proof that they impose upon scientific theories, creationists are rather easily satisfied with the lack of measurable evidence in support of their own beliefs.” Further to this thought he adds “this theory [of evolution] is built upon literally hundreds of thousands of pieces of concrete evidence by thousands of reputable scientists.”

Emerson’s closing words are powerful ones, “It is important to determine whether or not these arguments are in favour of true equality, or are they arguments for preferential treatment instead? Is the purpose of instruction in creationism to serve the best interests of education, or is it to
operate as a tool for indoctrination in the Christian religion?”

The speakers and audience pause to take a breath. The mood is respectful, but heavy. Frank Swoboda stands and begins his rebuttal. In response to Dr. Emerson’s mention of mistakes like Geocentricism and the ancient belief that the Earth was flat, he speaks for quite some time about the fact that Irving Washington’s The Voyages of Christopher Columbus was a fictitious story. In fact nobody ever thought that the Earth was flat, Swoboda insists.

He finishes with a challenge: “We don’t see it [evolution] happen. Show me one thing today that changes, and then we can start talking about evolution as being somewhat provable.”

During his rebuttal, Emerson asks Swoboda whether the Lord created only two dogs in the beginning, or if each breed was separately constructed, “Did God create all varieties from the beginning, and then place the Siberian Husky in Siberia, and the Hairless Chihuahua in Mexico, or did they find their own way there?”

Emerson later asks a more difficult question, “Considering the problems of starvation, poverty, pollution, environmental depletion, and above all, religious wars, could He have done a better job? Perhaps, if He had created the Sun on the first day, rather than on the fourth day, as the Genesis account has it, He could have done things differently.” At times, Goldie Emerson can get a little playful, “and by the way, how are those first three solar days being counted without the Sun?”

Many members of the audience are anxious to join the discussion, and so, the question period begins.

A woman follows up on Dr. Emerson’s point that Pastor Swoboda is promoting the teaching of specifically Christian creationism. “The native people say that creation took place because God shot an arrow into the air, and where it fell to the ground is where life started.” The pastor chooses not to comment on her statement.

A biochemist stands and speaks. “There was some comment that there is no evidence for evolution from inorganic to organic matter. I would like to suggest that Miller’s experiment, unequivocally, shows that evolution occurs from inorganic to organic matter.” The grey-bearded scientist describes the process, displaying considerable knowledge and experience in his field. “So I think it’s a fallacy to promote the idea that evolution has not occurred. It has occurred in front of our very eyes.”

Swoboda responds: “In that experiment that you mentioned? You needed a scientist, for one. You needed a lab. You needed all this equipment and with the right spark, you got something, right? So what we needed is a lot of intelligence to get to that point, and that’s my point. You needed intelligence to get to that point.”

An historian of science explains patiently how cells themselves have evolved over billions of years. He ends with a crowd-pleaser, “If we put frogs on a planet with the same conditions [as Earth], we probably could have princes in about three billion years.”

Swoboda responds, “Cell theory contradicts evolution.”

A woman confronts Emerson, “Why do you feel threatened by the teaching of creationism in the classroom? Why is it any more indoctrination than saying that evolution is the only theory?”

Emerson responds to the woman, “I think that if we taught creationism of lots of different sorts… that would be a healthy thing. But let’s not call it science. Let’s call it cultural enrichment or religious knowledge.”

An elderly woman responds to something Swoboda had said earlier, about some astronomers who were asked why they got into astronomy. “You know what their answer was?” Swoboda had said, “It was religious.” The woman, a retired astronomer, puts it somewhat differently: “Many astronomers are interested in epistemology.” She goes on to point out that “Astronomers use measurements that indicate that the universe is 13.7 billion years old; that’s only in the last five years that they’ve actually zeroed in on that amount, but certainly for many, many years we’ve known that the Earth is at least 4.59 billion years old.” She goes on to explain that radioactive dating has been done on Moon and Mars rocks and has shown almost identical dates. The speakers and audience are thus reminded that biology is not the only science that conflicts with Swoboda’s “ten thousand year-old Earth” ideas.

Civil discussion continued throughout the evening. Did anyone learn anything? I did. My mind was changed. While I still think that religious instruction in the science class makes no sense within the public school system, now, after hearing both sides of the argument, I also feel that religious instruction in the science class makes no sense in any school.