The Nature of Reality and the Reality of Nature

Albert Borgmann

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To speak of "the nature of reality and the reality of nature" is to play on words. More than that, however, it is to have a helpful guide because the words rightly suggest that the ways we consider and transform the structure of reality have a bearing on the power and presence of nature. And the title further implies—or, at any rate, I will draw this inference from it— that the kind of power and presence nature has is intimately connected with the moral quality of human conduct. Accordingly, I will trace the connections between the nature of reality, the reality of nature, and human conduct in today's radically new, deeply disquieting, but finally hopeful constellation.

Just to provide a backdrop, I begin with the original human condition: the hunting and gathering culture that prevailed for some hundreds of thousands of years. In those days, as far as we know, both the nature of reality and the reality of nature were divine. The world was full of divinities: it was a spiritual plenum. Nature, reality, and divinity were one. The human attitude that corresponded to this unified world was one of piety. Not that people were invariably pious. But it was understood that punishment and misery would be visited upon the impious sooner or later. Here on this continent we are at least vicariously within hailing distance of our original condition thanks to the heritage of the Native Americans. In the world of the Blackfeet, for instance, spirits were everywhere and spoke to humans in dreams and visions, through plants, animals, and the powers of the seasons.[1]

To the extent, however, that we have accepted Western Civilization, we are heirs of a different culture. It first began to stir in Ancient Greece. Much of its literature bespeaks the unity of nature *(physis),* reality (*ta onta),* and the divine *(to theion),* a unity the Greeks called beauty and order (*kosmos*). But at the beginning of the sixth century BC, we witness the intellectual departure that eventually led to the fragmentation of the cosmos. Thales was the first to displace piety toward the order of reality with curiosity about the composition of reality. Not that the people of the hunting and gathering cultures lacked curiosity. Yet for them curiosity, rather than being an inclusive attitude, was enfolded in piety. Thales, in any event, suggested that all there is consists of water in various stages of condensation and rarefaction. The world, he maintained, consists of a certain kind of stuff. At least for the philosophers, it was no longer a spiritual plenum. Reality, nature, and divinity no longer could be one. Nature, in due course, became a nonhuman region *of and within* reality, divinity a region *above and beyond* reality. Curiosity about the composition of reality led to the limitation of nature and to the transcendence of the divine.

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But the development to that stage took its course slowly and subterraneously. The Jewish, Islamic, and Christian Middle Ages achieved a vision of a divinely instituted order of reality. The natural and the supernatural were distinguished and reconciled through creation and revelation. Nature was created, divinity was not. Divinity needed to be revealed, nature did not. Faith was the dominant human attitude. But its rule was that of a constitutional monarch. Though faith ruled, it had to share some of its authority with reason.

When the medieval order began to collapse toward the end of the fifteenth century, philosophers once more raised the question of the composition of reality. This time they did so not out of curiosity as much as from a reconstructive zeal—from a desire to determine the ultimate components of reality so that, knowing their properties and possibilities, they would be able to construct a world of human liberty and prosperity. In light of this project, nature was seen as the recalcitrant power that kept humans in the bondage of disease and poverty and had to be forced into yielding its secrets and treasures.[2]

1 See, for example, James Welch, *Fools Crow* (New York: Viking, 1986).

2 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York: Harper, 1983).

The domination of nature gathered momentum as natural philosophy developed into physics and physics into chemistry. The increasingly sophisticated and powerful insights into the composition of reality led to the eradication of diseases, the multiplication of agricultural yields, the discovery of novel kinds of energy and materials, and to a life that for the citizens of the advanced industrial countries is in definite ways far freer and richer than it was in premodern circumstances.

If the modern project of controlling realty and dominating nature was to succeed, it had to culminate in a pervasive artificiality and the end of nature. Bill McKibben has given definition and currency to this view. The epochal event for him is the advent of a new atmosphere.[3] Until recently we could, when mourning the ravages inflicted on nature by human recklessness, take consolation from the immutable and unreachable forces of the heavens, wind and rain, heat and cold. But with the arrival of acid rain, the greenhouse effect, and the ozone hole, the sky and its works have been deeply affected by the work of humans. We have rendered sun and rain injurious and upset the pattern of the weather and the seasons.

McKibben is surely right in saying that the change of atmosphere marks a closure in the history of nature and humanity. But how significant is the closure? And what are we to learn from it? We can begin to respond by considering the Northern Rockies. They are as yet untouched by acid rain, the greenhouse effect, and the ozone hole, and millions of acres have been set aside as wilderness areas. The federal Wilderness Act of 1964 defines such areas as follows:

> A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value![4]

And yet the imprint of human work on the fauna and flora of the wilderness is inevitable and ubiquitous. Fire suppression has allowed Douglas firs to invade the open stands of mature ponderosa pine. Formerly, periodic low-intensity fires would clear out the understory while leaving the pines with their bare lower trunks and heavy bark unscathed. Soon many of these parklike groves with their golden columns and open canopies will be a thing of the past. The alternative is controlled burns. But such fires would of course not be natural. Naturally occurring fires, on the other hand, need to be stopped when there is a danger that they may spread to inhabited areas.[5] And to complicate matters further, even those former fires of low intensity may have been set by humans, the aboriginal inhabitants of this continent.

At the same time, noxious weeds like spotted knapweed and leafy spurge that humans have imported from Eurasia are moving into the wilderness. Unchecked they will suppress a variety of native plants over large areas. Eradication and total suppression would be prohibitively expensive. To what extent and by what means should one control the spread of these weeds?

No wilderness area in the Lower 48 states is a self-regulating wildlife system. The number of elk depends on the availability of winter forage, and the latter is often outside the wilderness boundaries or specially managed for feeding. Thus the number and the movement of the elk come to be determined by those areas that are set aside and secured for them. The composition of elk herds as regards age and sex is determined by hunting regulations. Other species such as the fisher, the grizzly, and the wolf were once at home in the wilderness areas. In most cases it will depend on our policies whether or not they will once more be found there.

McKibben is pessimistic about a revival of nature. But the pessimist, unlike the cynic, has some hope, however little.[6] The goal of McKibben's "humbler world" is still the return of "an independent, eternal, ever-sweet

3 Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), pp. 3-46.

4 John C. Hendee, George H. Stankey, and Robert C. Lucas, *Wilderness Management* Miscellaneous Publication 1365 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1978), p.82.

5 Hendee et al., *Wilderness Management*, pp. 249-278.

6 McKibben, *The End of Nature*, p. 215.

nature."[7] Nature in this sense is mortally wounded because we "have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial."[8] The result that McKibben warns of is this: "The world outdoors will mean much the same thing as the world indoors, the hill the same thing as the house."[9] If independence is the mark of the truly natural, then, considering the fate of the wildest parts of this country, we must recognize that a restoration of the atmosphere would not revive nature. Must we surrender to the cynical view that everything is and ever will be artificial?

There is a more hopeful prospect. And it comes into view when we recognize how constricting the common distinction between the natural and artificial is. This distinction is seen entirely from the modern side of the postmodern divide that we are presently approaching. The restriction of the modern point of view is particularly clear from a closer consideration of the natural while the examination of the artificial will begin to open up the postmodern condition. To begin with, nature as McKibben and many environmentalists think of it in its healthy condition is characterized by its independence. It is unaffected by humans. This view sees the arena of reality just as the modern project sees it except that the environmentalists cheer the opponent of the modem attempt at domination. Whereas the proponents of the modern project used to reproach nature for its recalcitrance, the environmentalists had been hoping for its invincibility, and seeing their favorite threatened with defeat, they want to restore at least its independence.

Independence is perhaps the clearest criterion that has been used to define and save nature on the assumption that the world is basically controllable. There are other and perhaps more complex attempts to erect absolute criteria that would delimit and secure the natural environment once and for all. Among these norms are biodiversity, genetic variety, ecosystem, biocentrism, the intrinsic value of nature, and "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community."[10]

This view of the world is in the thrall of the modern project, not only in its conception of nature but also in its attitude toward the controllable and artificial complement of nature. In contemporary culture, we appreciate control because it rewards us with the pleasures of consumption. Yet the value of a life devoted to consumption is very much in doubt. Having defined nature as independent and having so removed it from people's daily commerce with their world, environmentalists have been unable to draw on their understanding of nature to clarify our doubts about consumption. Environmentalists do of course object to the recklessness of consumption and invoke the threat to nature in doing so. In this way nature becomes the source of an entirely cautionary and scolding sort of attitude. Consumption remains the sweetly attractive if reckless center of life.

Granted, McKibben has in addition to his practical concern with human survival a loftier one. He would like to retain his reverence of nature's unreachable independence or even transcendence. There is for him a close affinity between the independence of nature and the transcendence of God.[11] But this childlike awe is being undermined by the apparent end of nature and death of God. When McKibben is faced with the prospect of having to give up this kind of respect, he is deeply dismayed.

While once we humans were as children over against nature in its exceeding force, we are now as young adults, entrusted with the care of parents whom we have surpassed in physical and perhaps in mental power as well. Once they took care of us; now we have to be their caretakers. Accordingly, in the words of Walter Truett Anderson, we have to become "caretakers of a planet, custodians of all its life forms and shapers of its (and our own) future."[12] McKibben responds with a *cri de coeur*: "This intended rallying cry depresses me more deeply than I can say. That is our destiny? To be 'caretakers' of a managed world, 'custodians' of all life?"[13] I am sure many adolescents have cried out similarly when they saw their parents change from haven and refuge to task and burden, and some, terrified like Peter Pan, resolutely refuse to leave the charmed world of childhood. An outright refusal to outgrow the modern period can be seen in the rage that has been aimed at "The Big Lie" of the human restoration of nature.[14] I suggest, however, that we must overcome Peter Panic, accept Peter's commission—the keys to the kingdom—and, in the spirit of Eric Higgs's cheerful attitude toward restoration, set out to cross the postmodern divide.[15]

7 Ibid., pp.190 and 209.

8 Ibid., p.58.

9 Ibid., p.48.

10 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac (London:* Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 224-225. For the intrinsic value of nature, see the *Monist's* special issue on this topic, *vol.*75, no. 2 (April 1992), with contributions by John O'Neill, Robert Elliot, Tom Regan, Eugene C. Hargrove, Bryan G. Norton, Jim Cheney, Anthony Weston, and Holmes Rolston III.

11 McKibben, *The End of Nature*, pp. 71-84.

12 Quoted in McKibben, *The End of Nature*, p. 214.

13 Ibid.

14 Eric Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 12 (1992):231-241.

15 Eric S. Higgs, "A Quantity of Engaging Work to Be Done: Ecological Restoration and Morality in a Technological Culture," *Restoration and*

From the despairing modern point of view, the world entire appears to be artificial and controllable. But a more forward-looking approach reveals a rather more complex and contingent world. To see this, imagine yourself immersed in the wintry reality of the Northern Rockies. A powerful way of experiencing it is alpine skiing. In the higher reaches of a ski area, you find yourself in a beautiful and forbidding world, and at seventy-five hundred feet you are the only charismatic megafauna in sight. The bears are hibernating; the cats and ungulates have descended to five or four thousand feet. The trees have been transformed into snow sculptures. You may come across a weasel, scurrying in and out of the snow, or a snowshoe hare flitting from one bush to another. Otherwise the chickadees in the trees and the crows in the air have the high country to themselves, a world extending endlessly, austere in whites and blues and, but for the peaks and ridges, soft and smooth of shape. Skiing down, you dive, bank, swoop, and turn much like the crows overhead. The world's center of gravity has shifted to these high and pristine slopes, and you are the animal that has the skill and grace to appropriate them fully.

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But wait. How did you get up here? And what are you carving your turns on as you cruise down the hill? A high-speed chair lift scooped you up, rushed you along, and deposited you gently. Now you are flying down a run that has been cleared of trees and rocks, reshaped by bulldozers, and planted in grass. Underground there are miles of lines for water and compressed air, connected to snow guns that line the side of the run. At the bottom of the hill, a pump house and a compressor building supply water and air that, guided and monitored by computers, are mixed by the guns into the quality and quantity of snow needed at the time. It has taken a $20 million system with a thousand snow guns to produce the snow at a cost of $2,700 per acre-foot. But this is not all. An army of snowcats, $l50,000 apiece, has worked all night to groom the slope to the shape of an undulating corduroy-surfaced ballroom floor.[16]

Natural snow has become dispensable—or, rather worse at times, a nuisance, as a Vermont marketing director tells us: "It sounds silly, but I hope it doesn't snow tomorrow. It will just make it difficult for people to drive up. The skiing we've got is already wonderful."[17] The cost of providing artificial snow, the crucial role that computers play in this ("many of the technological leaps can be traced directly to computers," says Steve Cohen), and the fact that people may still have problems getting to the winter wonder world all suggest that we should simply and bravely face up to what McKibben has told us is already the case: nature outdoors in essence is no longer distinguishable from the artificial indoors.[18]

Let me therefore make this modest proposal: an artificial indoor ski area in downtown Los Angeles. What would it look like? You may have seen in a sporting goods store the moving carpets that are mounted like large tilted conveyor belts and allow a skier to ski down the incline so that the skis sliding down and the carpet moving up roughly balance and, to a stationary observer, the skier stays in place. In addition to boots, skis, and poles, the skier is given a pair of goggles (skiers are used to these) where the lens is replaced by two micro television screens.[19] The rest of the story tells itself. We play on those screens moving scenes of ski slopes that are coordinated with the varying speed and pitch of the conveyor belt carpet. Everything else is a matter of technological refinement: blowers to simulate the rushing of the wind, a harness to suspend the wayward or crashing skier, and more. And let me briefly extol the virtues of the new kind of skiing, the reduction of gasoline consumption and automobile pollution, the infinite variety of conditions and terrains, the instant, continuous, and wide availability of skiing, and the supreme safety of the sport.

While the modern view of this pervasively artificial situation tends to inspire melancholy, as it has done in McKibben's experience, there is a postmodern reaction that welcomes the disappearance of the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial and indeed all dichotomies. Such a postmodern view revels in the resulting abundance of possibilities and is zealous in declaring all of them to be equally valuable. But there is an alternative and more sober postmodern vision that is concerned to point up crucial distinctions in the contemporary situation. These differences are best described, however, not as degrees of artificiality but as degrees of reality—"reality" taken in the sense of

Management Notes 9 (Winter 1991):97-104. For Peter's commission, see Matthew 16:18-19.

16 Steve Cohen, "High-Tech Snow," *Ski* (March 1992):28-39.

17 Quoted in Cohen, "High-Tech Snow," p. 28.

18 McKibben, p.29.

19 Gary Stix, "Headsets: Television Goggles Are the Vision of the Future," *Scientific American* (March 1993):141.

genuineness, seriousness, or commanding presence, the sense we have in mind when we speak of real gold as opposed to things that merely glitter and of a real person, a mensch, as opposed to a dude.

The philosophical challenge, of course, is to circumscribe this sense of reality in a way clear and precise enough to counter the suspicion of deconstructive postmodernism that advocates of a substantial reality are wistful and sentimental at best and patriarchal and fascist at worst. To fix our attention on a particular instance, how do we explicate the difference between a mountain in the Northern Rockies, covered with natural snow, and a skiorama in Los Angeles?

[W]e can now say that today the critical and crucial distinction for nature and humans is not between the natural and artificial but between the real and hyperreal.

The difference, I suggest, is this. The mountain possesses a commanding presence and a telling continuity with the surrounding world. The skiorama, to the contrary, provides a disposable experience that is discontinuous with its environment. Consider first the experience of the mountain in winter. The snowy trail you are skiing down tells you about the particular and unsurpassable world you are in. This is January at seventy-five hundred feet. The amount of snow tells you something about the immediate past: Pacific moisture and arctic cold have been colliding and mixing with each other often this winter, but not often enough to produce a snowpack and a runoff this spring that would relieve the drought of these past six years.

The downhill skiing experience in the skiorama, being entirely at your disposal and discontinuous with its environment, tells you nothing about the world at large. It may in fact positively mislead you if you surrender to the sensation of cruising down a snowy slope on a bright winter morning. When the rolling carpet slows down and levels off and you remove your goggles, you are rudely returned to the sweltering midnight of Los Angeles.

Strangely enough, such artificial experiences, while doubtful in retrospect, seem superior to real ones in prospect and while in progress. They are more assuredly available and in greater diversity and, if engineered with care and sophistication, tickle our sensibilities more gratifyingly than real things ever could. This superiority is well captured in the term "hyperreality." Accordingly, we can now say that today the critical and crucial distinction for nature and humans is not between the natural and artificial but between the real and hyperreal.

Though "hyperreality" is not a widely used term, the norm it is intended to capture is a powerful cultural force. It appears to have caught up with the fictional skiorama in Los Angeles. A recent AP story tells us of an "Indoor Mountain: Japanese Build Enclosed Ski Slope Near Tokyo," and it begins its account with the unmistakable intonation of hyperreality: "It sounds like the perfect ski resort: virgin snow every day, no wind or rain, easy to get to and no long lines for the lift."[20] When it continues with an enumeration of the shortcomings of the indoor ski arena—the lack of mountain scenery and fresh air—it merely points out what obstacles remain on the way to full hyperreality.

"Reality" in the widest of its senses refers to all there is, and to call something real in that sense is to say nothing. But we do in ordinary discourse use "real" in an eminent sense to pick out things and events that are notably serious, genuine, and valuable. One way of explicating the intuition that guides us in such talk is to say that what is eminently real has a commanding presence and a telling and strong continuity with its world. These two traits are connected. Whatever is devoid of contextual bonds and hence freely, that is, instantaneously and ubiquitously, available is therefore subject to our whims and control and cannot command our respect in its own right. Conversely, whatever engages our attention due to its own dignity does so in important part as an embodiment and disclosure of the world it has emerged from.

The distinction between (eminent) reality and hyperreality is not structured and secured by a bright dividing line that allows one to place whatever one comes across unfailingly on one side of it or the other. The distinction is moored by clear cases at the endpoints of a spectrum: wilderness at one end, for example, and videos at the other. In between there are intricate and interesting intermediates. A distinction is helpful if it provides orientation—and a continuum, firmly anchored at its extremes, does this as well as a dichotomy.

Still, for some social critics the real/hyperreal distinction is one without a difference or, at any rate, without a moral difference. By the most widely discussed moral

20 Beth Sutel, "Indoor Mountain," *Missoulian* (22 June 1993): A8.

standards, hyperreality does no worse and may very well do better than reality. In our example, the hyperreal instance appears to be more socially just, culturally diverse, environmentally benign, and physically healthy. But people of good sense have noticed that as we allow ourselves to slide from the real to the less real and hyperreal, our moral condition is undergoing a crucial change.

In the case of downhill skiing, this change has been well articulated by Lito Tejada-Flores. Contemplating the question whether skiing is better or worse than it was twenty years ago, he concludes:

> Skiing has not merely changed randomly under the influence of technology and marketing, it has evolved steadily in one direction. Evolved in three steps from adventure, to sport, to recreation. Maybe I'm being unfair to say this, but I see this evolution as the progressive reduction (and occasional elimination) of levels of challenge in skiing. Skiers have gone from *adventure* (dealing with uncertainty in a wild mountain landscape) to *sport* (all-out physical involvement on known terrain) to *recreation* (the undemanding enjoyment of simple rhythmic movements).[21]

Lito Tejada-Flores has seen that there is a symmetry between reality and humanity—that human nobility declines when the uncertainty of the wild mountain landscape is tamed and its challenge is silenced.

Lito Tejada-Flores has captured the heroic case of mountains and adventures. A child named Lucy has seen that the same decline is to be found in the inconspicuous details of contemporary culture. In a letter to God she writes: "Dear God, do plastic flowers make you mad? I would be if I made the real ones. Lucy."[22] Lucy sees what many of us have become blind to: that there is human impertinence in the refusal to care for what is fragile and to delight in what is passing—real flowers. Thus when the natural/artificial distinction is replaced by the real/hyperreal distinction, it is clear that the problem with consumption is not its sweet recklessness but its debilitating mindlessness.

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21 Lito Tejada-Flores, "Is Skiing Better or Worse Than It Was Twenty Years Ago?" *Powder* (January 1992):57.

22 An apocryphal letter in the tradition of *Children's Letters to God*, ed. Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample (New York; Pocket Books, 1966).

But we need to grasp more firmly what follows from the postmodern condition for reality, nature, and human conduct. To begin with reality, its character at the close of the modern era is characterized by contingency. Most prosaically the term signals the discovery that reality is far less controllable and predictable than we have thought. We have come to see that physical processes exhibit patterns that are intricate beyond the modern dreams of computability and predictability.[23]

In a cultural sense, the contingency of reality means that the world refuses to comply with a vision of order that is fixed by a priori universal standards, be they the independence of nature, the transcendence of God, or the autonomy of humankind. But in neither the physical nor the cultural sense does contingency mean anything like featureless randomness.[24] Contingent reality has its own physiognomy, and the numerous and intricate lines that shade and separate off the real from the hyperreal constitute the most characteristic features on the face of the postmodern world.

What bearing does the contingency of reality have on the reality of nature? The principal task today is not to single out nature by some exclusive definition, but to include and appreciate it among the real and eloquent things and practices that are threatened by the hypertrophic overlay of hyperreality. This, of course, does not mean that the distinctiveness of nature should be submerged and lost in the contingency of reality. Something like "plants and animals" is sufficient to point up the natural to a first approximation, and from there it is a matter of distinguishing degrees of reality within nature.

The kind of reality that is akin to nature at its most real consists of the things and practices of athletics, of the arts, and of religion. What real nature today has in common with these is its powerful presence and a vigorous continuity with the world at large. Like athletics, art, and religion, nature today speaks in manifold and unforethinkable voices and, most important perhaps, in voices that are always responses to our own. And just as we would

23 James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987).

24 N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

not doubt the autonomy of a spouse whose speech recalls the words of his partner, so we should not think of nature as broken simply because everywhere it now shows the traces of human actions.

Nature in this country speaks not only in the ancient voice of the wilderness but in its domestic intonations as well.[25] Vicki Hearne has lately reminded us that, although obviously we breed and train dogs and horses, they in turn can instruct and even humble us with their insight, courage, or elegance.[26] Nature can be eloquent in parks and gardens and can speak at the very center of our houses and apartments when it is celebrated in the culture of the table.[27]

[J]ust as we would not doubt the autonomy of a spouse whose speech recalls the words of his partner, so we should not think of nature as broken simply because everywhere it now shows the traces of human actions.

What finally follows from the contingency of reality and the eloquence of nature for human conduct? Here too the reply to nature must be seen in the context of the human response to those real things that command our best efforts and orient us within the world at large. What they inspire us to do is to pursue the kind of excellence that culminates in celebration and is warranted by it. Such excellence is not the privilege of the rich or smart. There were times in human history when as a matter of common practice parents would teach their children the skills that issue in festive dining and dancing, in music and in storytelling. The nobility of practices like these is within everyone's reach.

The kinship of art and nature can further serve us as a guide to a clearer understanding of the standards of excellence we should aim at in our dealing with nature. Nature is now entrusted to us much like medieval cathedrals are to Europeans. Cathedrals are constantly abraded by the wear of time and the offenses of technology. To keep the destructive fumes and liquids of industry at bay takes determination. But that is not enough. Are we to let the spires, pinnacles, statues, and crockets erode into featureless remnants of their former glory? And if we remove the originals to safety and replace them with copies, are we content to see the cathedral turn more and more into a modern duplicate of itself? Are we willing to replace old timbers with steel girders, bell ringers with electric motors, resonant voices with public address systems?

There cannot be universal rules or algorithms for such problems. To each question an answer must be drawn from experience for this particular situation. And yet from the contingency of circumstances and efforts, the cathedral continues to rise in its own right. In this country, where no medieval bequests have come down to us, we have, belatedly and undaunted by the scorn of art historians, erected our own gothic churches. By now they have taken root in our communities and memories and become sacred sites.

The rightness of all this struggling and temporizing is warranted when people gather in cathedrals to celebrate. They may do so in the penumbra of divinity when, as secular citizens, they come to hear an organ concert. Or they do so as true believers when they attend mass. Music makes piers soar and vaults arch. Naves, transepts, and choirs center worship.

Similarly, every unroaded area needs to be secured, every wilderness attended to, and many an abused stretch of prairie or river restored or built up. Each such task requires its own approach and solution. If there is a general guideline, it would only be this: to save or restore the area's commanding presence and to guard its coherence with its environment and its tradition. And all that labor is warranted when we hike, ski, or canoe through a wild or natural area, real persons in real nature.

Human conduct that is invigorated by reality and devoted to excellence and celebration differs notably from conduct that is dedicated to the production and consumption of hyperreal commodities. Even if the latter pursuit were to live up to the conventional moral norms of ecological prudence and social justice, it would constitute a pyrrhic moral victory, for the result would merely guarantee that the debilitating mindlessness of consumption would be secured for all times and shared equally with all people.

But of course we in the United States are not as prudent as we might be nor nearly as just as we ought to be. Our selfishness here and among nations needs little elaboration. Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that even the single minded proponents of ecological prudence

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25 Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), and Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990).

26 Vicki Hearne, *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

27 Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).

or social justice have reason to pause and wonder whether their causes may not need the invigoration of a more substantial notion of moral excellence. Among the eloquent things that may invigorate and inspire us in this way, nature has a special standing in this country. We are uniquely Nature's Nation.[28] Nature in its many voices speaks more powerfully here than in Europe or Japan. If the people of this country learn to listen to those voices more attentively, they may regain that relaxed energy, generosity, and optimism—the grace under pressure—that other nations used to admire in this one.

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28 That this is not a simple or easy fate is clear from Perry Miller's *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).