

Comembership: An Alternative Ethical Orientation to Nature

It is unequivocal that our current practices are environmentally unsustainable, so why have they endured? Several explanations exist, all of which operate under the faulty assumption that humans are separate from nature. In an effort to challenge this assumption, many environmentalists advocate the stewardship ethic, which posits humans as nature's guardian as opposed to its master. This ethical framework, however, does not sufficiently conceptualize human beings as being a part of nature. Thus, borrowing from the language of environmentalist Aldo Leopold, our ecological problem requires an ethical framework that views humans and all else as *co-members* of the environment.

The stewardship ethic has historical and religious roots in Western Christianity and underlies our exploitative relationship with nature. Firstly, it assumes humans have a superior moral right to manipulate the environment to our benefit, even at the expense of other species. Secondly, it conceptualizes humans as separate from and masters of nature. This sense of separation emerged when Western science, technology, and religion converged. Christianity is founded upon the anthropocentric notion that humans exist independently of nature. The Bible maintains that human beings, made in God's image, mark the beginning of time. God, a human figure, created nature to be utilized and ruled over by humans. As a result, human beings are free to use land as they please as long as they are reaping some benefit.

The Christian image of man as master of nature was manifested in the advent of agricultural technology in early human history and justified our violent use of the environment. Whereas Paganism's tenant of *animism* required humans to think critically about their use of the environment, Christianity gave way to an attitude of indifference towards nature and its inhabitants. Over time, as humans gained confidence in their abilities to manipulate and control ecological processes, technological innovation became increasingly destructive to the land. Due to technological innovation, modern living creates an

illusion of separateness from nature. Such separation has allowed wasteful consumerism to run rampant, as most consumers are unaware of how much waste they themselves produce. Similarly, environmental considerations are excluded from economic calculations. The true environmental costs of our individual choices, therefore, are obfuscated.

The root cause of environmental destruction is our belief that humans are separate from nature. Contrary to this ethical approach to understanding our relationship to the environment, an ethic of comembership rejects the notion that humans and nature are separate entities. In fact, it emphasizes that humans *are animals* themselves. More specifically, humans are animals who must cooperate with other flora and fauna in order to survive. For modern humans, that means eliminating our environmentally unsustainable practices even though they afford us certain modern comforts or luxuries that we individually enjoy. Stewardship has relegated our collective responsibility to act sustainably and responsibly to the public sphere, absolving citizens of their individual responsibilities as comembers in nature.

Comembership recognizes the inherent limits to government action and human knowledge. Policymaking might address one singular aspect of the environment, but rarely is it designed to protect the integrity of an entire ecosystem. For instance, environmental law is useful for outlawing endangered species hunting, but it cannot teach individual citizens how to source their food or identify which corporations employ unsustainable business practices. Given this reality, humans, as comembers in nature, need to learn for themselves what is sustainable and unsustainable practice. All policy presupposes certain shared social knowledge. If individuals do not cultivate sustainable practice in their daily lives, then such knowledge will not exist, thus perpetuating the problem. The government is an important agent of environmental conservation; however, as active members of any government, all humans should share this responsibility.

In our current moment, human activity is the main catalyst of environmental destruction. What we decide to do about it is determined by how we conceptualize the human-nature relationship. As a

comember, there is a larger sense of moral accountability to other species and to the environment as a whole. Perhaps more importantly, as a comember, there is a larger sense of agency and purpose.

Individual conduct can spill up to create broader change in environmental practice. Citizens can engage and collaborate with each other to protect the health of the land-community which they share. Regardless of what laws or policies are on the books, our way of living cannot be considered moral or sustainable while it is actively destroying the means of survival for countless other species with whom we share our planet.