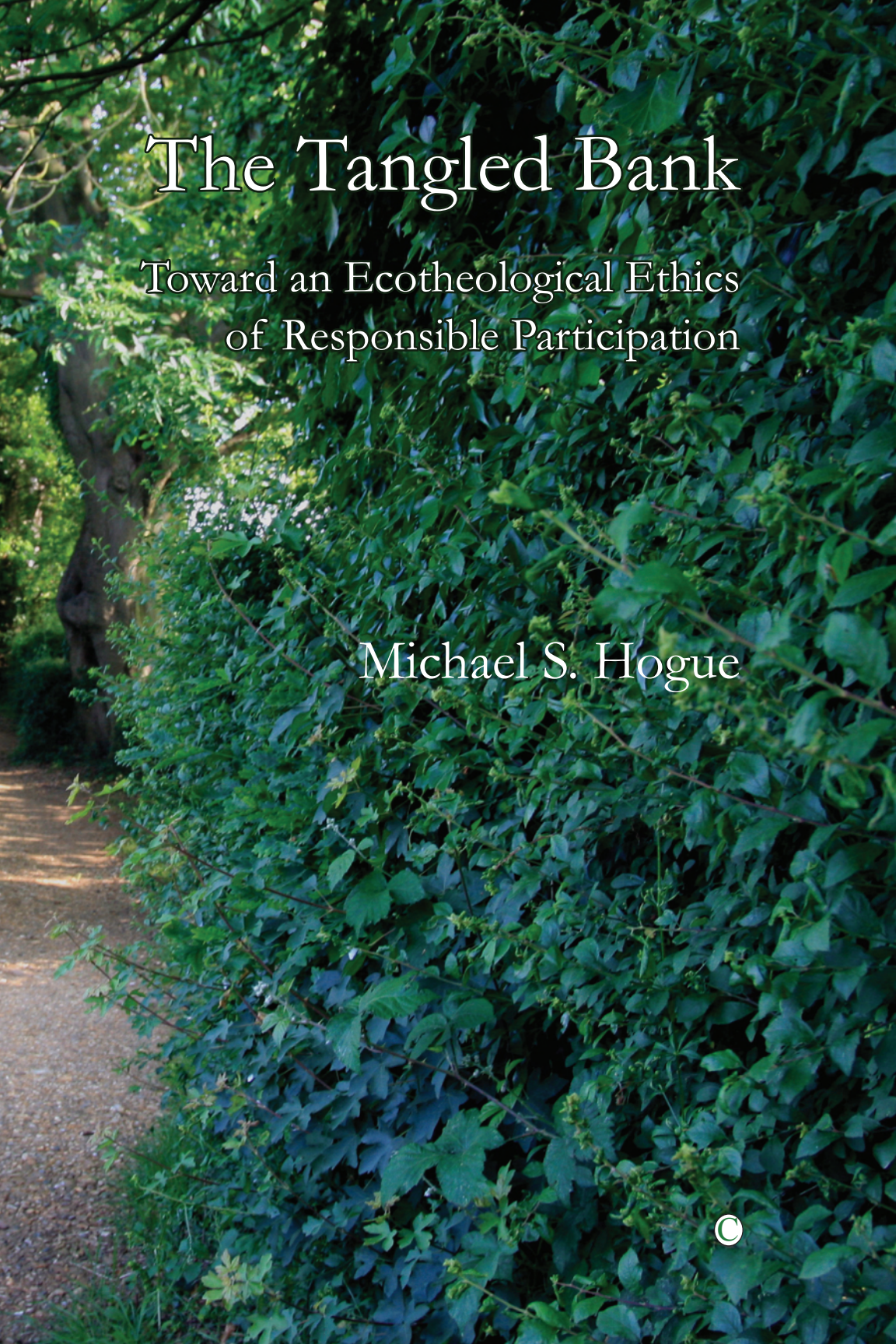




The Tangled Bank

Toward an Ecotheological Ethics
of Responsible Participation

Michael S. Hogue



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*Toward an Ecotheological Ethics
of Responsible Participation*

MICHAEL S. HOGUE



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*To my parents,
Donald Gary and Karen Hogue*

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Preface

GROWING UP THE SON OF A PREACHER IN THE WOODS AND LAKES OF northwest Michigan (where, if you hold up your Michigan-shaped left hand, your pinky touches the ring finger), nature and religion have always been prominent in the ecology of my life. But they were often separate. My religious life was for a long time a largely private affair, the personal business of inwardness. It was what I attended to on Sundays and occasionally in independent reading and prayer. My life in nature, on the other hand, was the rest of the rest. I spent much of my childhood immersed in the beauties of the Great Lakes region, often water-skiing from morning to evening on the crystal cold lakes that pockmark northern Michigan, frequently camping in its many square miles of woods, and sometimes getting lost and found while hiking and biking in the network of trails on the outskirts of my hometown. While growing up, my work life was also rooted in the natural world. I was variously employed on cherry farms, on the beaches of Lake Michigan, by an environmental newspaper, and by a land conservancy to build trails on its land preserves.

I have changed a great deal in the many years that have passed since I moved away from northern Michigan. I have experienced more of the worlds of nature and of religious life. I have traveled through and lived in many wilderness and urban places, appreciating their many beauties and also mourning their many wounds. And as a religious person, my faith has emerged into something much more public and engaged than it used to be. I remain the religious inquirer that I always have been, but I have also transitioned from being a student of theological ethics at a divinity school to a theological educator at a seminary.

In the time between my childhood and adulthood, as well as between the time when I began this book and the time that I completed it, I have worked more deliberately to bring together my love and concern for the natural world with my commitments as a religious person and theological scholar. In this more deliberate work, of which this book has

been part, I have come to recognize the degree to which all along, even and especially when I didn't recognize it, the various stages and places and natural and religious habitats of my life have always intermingled. I have come to recognize in a biographical sense what John Muir once said of the universe, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else . . ."

I am not exactly the same person I was when I was growing up in northern Michigan. Nor am I exactly the same person today that I was when I began writing this book. If I were to start over on this book today, it would likely end up being quite a bit different. Yet the different selves I have been in the different places and times of my life are all a part of who I am now and what this book has become. And so while it is not at all explicit, there is a little bit of northern Michigan beneath the surface of this book. Deep within the scholarship, between the lines, there is a little bit of northern Michigan's clear night skies and a little of its rain that comes like a veil across the lake. And within my conversations with Hans Jonas and James M. Gustafson, around which this book is organized, there is the influence of the many lives of the people I have known in northern Michigan, their hardships as farmers in bad times and their inspiring efforts to preserve the beauty of the land.

All this is to say that in the course of writing this book, from the earliest stages of research to the final phases of editing, I have learned how true to life Charles Darwin's image of the "tangled bank" is. No life is ever fully independent of other lives, and my life during the time that I have been writing this book has intersected with and been nourished by many others. I hope that you will read what I have to offer here as an expression of and an invitation to ongoing collaboration on one of the most important tasks of our time, responsibly participating as religious and theological scholars in the work of preserving the possibility and even nourishing the futures of nature and human life.

In keeping with my book's title, my community of support in the several years of writing has been very much like a tangled bank. My research would neither have had a beginning nor come to a conclusion (open as it remains), without a sustaining network of reinforcing interdependencies. Professor William Schweiker, my former doctoral advisor at the University of Chicago, has been of especially momentous help. He is a master scholar and a gifted teacher-mentor, a true Socratic midwife. His encouragement and expertise have been invaluable to me,

and I am honored now to know him and to continue to work with him as a friend and colleague.

I am also fortunate to have a mother and father who not only understand and support my scholarly vocation, but who also read multiple drafts of my chapters and provided helpful technical and substantive contributions along the way. We have spent many late evenings talking through the frustrations and epiphanies that invariably attend the writing of a book. My father especially has worked with me through nearly every detail of my work. He stands for me as a great example of religiously faithful and morally engaged intellectual life.

I would also like to thank Kincade, my young son, who was barely walking when I began this work and is now a soccer player, a baseball slugger, and on occasion, a cleaner of his bedroom. His smiles and laughter and joy for life, and his troubles and his learning, inspire my own life and remind me continually of the larger purposes of intellectual and religious life. I have learned more about the meaning and importance of responsible participation as his father than from any of the many books that line my shelves.

And lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank my wife, Sara, for truly making everything better.

Introduction

WITH TYPICAL VICTORIAN RESERVE, CHARLES DARWIN WRITES IN THE concluding paragraph of his revolutionary work, *The Origin of Species*,

It is *interesting* to contemplate a *tangled bank*, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the branches, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.¹

But the biotic diversity and the interrelation among species and their habitats Darwin perceives are not simply interesting. Even on the tiny scale of some nameless patch of earth, this diversity of interrelations is shattering! Adding to Darwin's awe is his conviction that some set of laws underlies, produces, and sustains the variety of living forms, their difference from as well as their dependence on one another. Biotic diversity—the origin, proliferation, dying out, and intermingling of species—is constituted by the pressure of natural selection acting upon the organic forces of growth, reproduction, inheritance, and variation. From the dynamism of this pressure and these forces, “from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher mammals, directly follows.”²

As the production of higher mammals follows from this dynamism, so also do human beings. But with humans come many capacities that seem unrelated to this story of evolution, perhaps even contrary to it. For humans are moral and religious animals as well, capable of conceiving and choosing the right, of envisioning and acting toward the good, of registering and constructing visions of the ultimate purposes

1. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 459 (my italics).

2. Ibid.

of existence. While often selfishly pursuing our own interests, on many occasions we sacrifice our individual and immediate concerns for the interests of other individuals or for the good of a community. While we certainly make war, while many become rich through the exploitation of others, we also make peace and strive for justice.

How can a creature capable of such morally worthy projects be the product of nature's "war," a war in which to sacrifice oneself and through oneself one's offspring seems to run counter to the central biotic drive of survival? How can a morally striving religious animal be the product of what seems at best to be the amoral nature of mundane evolutionary processes? Darwin's picture of the biotic diversity and the interrelationships among species in their riparian habitat provokes interesting questions indeed, especially questions about how to understand the meaning and responsibilities of the human moral relation to the natural world!

Darwin's "tangled bank" of interdependency provides a suggestive framing image for the intertwined concerns of this book. It indicates the complexity of exploring the meaning and moral responsibilities of being human through the relations among the biological sciences, ethics, and theology. As with the multiple forms of life inhabiting Darwin's bank, biological theory, ethics, and theology are not entirely autonomous from one another. While different, their boundaries are porous rather than impermeable. Biological theory, ethics, and theology are matrices of inquiry that significantly impinge on one another.

Among its other tasks, this book examines the interstices within the "tangled bank" of these disciplines in order to gain a better view of the moral meanings and responsibilities of the human as a natural historical creature. Looking into these questions is especially important, I argue, in a time of environmental crisis. And so more constructively, the image of the "tangled bank" also provides a metaphor for an eco-theological ethics of responsible participation, which this book proposes as a promising direction for an ethics for our time. In addition, "the tangled bank" provides a rhetorical framing motif for comparative critique of Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas and Christian theologian James M. Gustafson, thinkers who have been under-appreciated within the field of environmental ethics but that I will advance as significant resources. And last, Darwin's "tangled bank" points toward what I take

to be one of the most pressing environmental ethical problems of our time—the conjunction of radical power and moral uncertainty.

Power itself is not the problem, for power is merely the potential to impact the world in some way. Power harbors as much a constructive potential for good as a destructive potential for harm. The problem with power is knowledge of what to do with it—how to apply it, what ends to direct it toward, how to constrain it. Whether the impact of power on the world is for good or evil turns on the freedom of individuals, communities, and societies to choose how to exercise power. Choice is entailed in the application of power. And the possibility of choice assumes that those choosing are sufficiently free to imagine and actually to bring about the alternative outcomes that are the subject of choice. Choice is correlative to power whether power is related existentially to human individuals or socially to communities. Whether understood in a principally negative way as domination, on a more positive collaborative model, or in terms of some other construction, power and choice go hand in hand and always will.

But in our time this correlation has taken on a new moral gravity. For at the very moment when the capacities of our individual and communal power to alter the world are so profoundly increasing, as individuals and communities we are less morally confident than ever about how to exercise that power. One of the most acute moral problems for us, then, is that the colossal growth of our human power to impact the world is joined by an increasing uncertainty about how morally to guide this power. This book analyzes this relatively undertheorized problem in relation to the environmental crisis and technological culture, drawing upon the insights of Jonas and Gustafson and bringing them forward as crucial but neglected resources for constructive thinking in environmental ethics.

The rise of moral uncertainty has many sources. In at least two ways, the growth of human power itself is one of these. New scientific and technological developments continuously reframe our understandings of the context and stakes of moral action. As we learn more from the natural sciences about our world we come to a greater understanding of the complex impacts of human behavior in it. Awareness of the interdependencies of our world challenges our frameworks for determining the consequences of action, for weighing risks and opportunities, for determining what is right and good. In all of these ways and

more, increase of knowledge and power complicates the moral life. So the growth of power through the combination of new knowledge and technologies is a generative cause of our moral uncertainty.

A second cause of the rise of moral uncertainty stems from our increasing awareness of and sensitivity to moral pluralism. This too is related to the expansion of human power. For our awareness of moral diversity is in part the effect of innovative communication and transportation technologies that bring the far reaches of the world closer to home, fomenting contact and exchange among different cultures in unprecedented ways.

While increasing knowledge of the vast differences that structure our world may in essence be a positive good, one of its negative effects can be the protraction of ethical and policy debates regarding the exercise of power. Debate over important matters and consideration of moral differences are properly a part of the process of careful moral deliberation and a necessary prelude to thoughtful action. And yet when considered debate devolves into reticence, quietude, or paralysis we fail morally in the face of the gravity of our expanded power. Power always entails that moral choices must be made and the significance of choice in our time of radical power is profoundly magnified. So a significant task for contemporary ethics, philosophical and theological, environmental and otherwise, entails facing the problematic conjunction of radical power and moral uncertainty.

Another source of our moral uncertainty is the rise of historical consciousness. Philosophers, cultural theorists, anthropologists and others have in recent decades severely called into question the characteristic modern Enlightenment search for absolutes, for a neutral epistemic foundation from which to access objective truth. The understanding that all quests for knowledge and norms are in some way interested, perspectival, historically situated, culturally partial, and socially particular is now exceedingly familiar. Assumptions about the ahistorical nature of reason have ceded to emphases on contingency. We know that knowers are not only passive receptacles of the real but participate in the construction of reality. The quest for universally binding moral norms has largely given way to descriptions of the cultural and historical embeddedness of morality.

The rise of historical consciousness thus raises the specters of epistemic and moral relativism. Nostalgic calls for a return to an ahistorical

vision of reason and morality are certainly out of place. And yet it is equally certain that our moral uncertainty is a grave problem in the face of our expanding powers to alter the world, and specifically the natural environment that sustains us as well as all other forms of life.

This book is motivated by the problem of power and uncertainty as one of the most pressing moral problems of our time. But this is a vast problem and responding adequately to it requires choosing a point of entry, isolating a topic that enables seeing it in finer-grained detail. So while generally concerned with the problem of power and moral uncertainty, this book is more specifically concerned with power and uncertainty in light of our environmental crisis and technological culture. My aim, in light of these specific concerns, is to articulate the contours of an ecotheological ethics of responsible participation, utilizing a moral anthropological method to comparatively critique the intersection of biological theory, ethics, and theology in the works of Jonas and Gustafson.

I aim to do several things in this introduction. I will first describe the roles of power and moral uncertainty in the environmental crisis. Following this, I will propose a moral anthropological method as a suggestive but underdeveloped strategic option for theory construction and interpretation in environmental ethics. I will then present the basic shape of my argument and introduce the ethical theories of Jonas and Gustafson.

Power, Uncertainty, and Environmental Crisis

The conjunction of radical power and moral uncertainty manifests itself in multiple interrelated aspects of contemporary moral experience, existential, political, and social, each of which warrants careful consideration. Yet underlying and reaching through each of these manifestations is one that I take to be in some ways more fundamental—the environmental crisis. The expansion of human power through the invention of new technologies, and the swirling debates regarding choices and policies about the guidance of this power, have introduced unprecedented moral dilemmas and confusion concerning the human relationship to the natural world.

Never before has humanity had the knowledge, skill, tools, or power irreversibly to alter the natural environment surrounding and

sustaining it. Nature before recent times was a reliably stable backdrop to human existence. While there never was a time in human history when humans did not impact nature, the range of this inevitable human impact was until the last couple of centuries relatively limited. There is an enormously wide moral gap between the capacity to change nature partially and the capacity to alter it totally. Navigating this gap is one of the most significant ethical tasks of our time.³

The environmental crisis can be understood as a fundamental moral problem for at least two reasons. First, insofar as the existential, social, and political dimensions of moral experience depend upon an ecological order sufficient to sustain them, then an environmental crisis that may compromise that order is more basic. Both the moral experience of individuals and the moral structure of societies simultaneously rest upon and are shaped by the condition of natural environments. Natural environments are fundamental to human moral experience, then, in that they provide a framework that shapes the limits and possibilities of such experience. This is not to say that natural environments are entirely determinative of human experience, for historical and cultural contexts also shape experience in profound ways. Yet, while history and culture shape moral experience, nature, history, and culture are always intertwined. And insofar as humans are biological as well as historical and cultural creatures, human moral experience is rooted in nature.

And second, through innovations in biotechnology, the historic human aim to control the natural environment has crossed a morally significant threshold. As Jürgen Habermas puts this, “more and more of what we are ‘by nature’ is coming within the reach of biotechnological intervention . . . [and this] is but another manifestation of our tendency to extend continuously the range of what we can control within our natural environment.”⁴ In other words, the technological extension

3. German sociologist Ulrich Beck articulates this moral gap and the challenges of navigating it by specifying the unique character of “risk” in our time. He writes, “Unlike the risks of early industrial society, contemporary nuclear, chemical, ecological, and biological threats are (1) not limitable, either socially or temporally; (2) not accountable according to the prevailing rules of causality, guilt, and liability; and (3) neither compensable nor insurable.” For these reasons, he continues, “the regulating system for the ‘rational’ control of industrial devastation is about as effective as a bicycle brake on a jetliner.” See Beck, “Politics in Risk Society,” in *Ecological Enlightenment*, 2.

4. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 23.

of human power into areas such as genetic engineering dissolves the historically entrenched categorical boundary between the surrounding natural environment and the nature of human beings. In an unprecedented way, humanity hereby becomes not only the subject of the power to manipulate nature, but also the object of this power.⁵ Understanding this shift is crucial to understanding more fully our human participation within and responsibility for the environmental crisis.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens articulates well this aspect of the environmental crisis in his interpretation of the difference between “external” and “manufactured” risk. By “external risk” he refers to the kind of risk experienced as coming from the outside, from the objective conditions of the natural world and its capacity both to sustain and do harm to humans. For most of modern human history, Giddens writes, this “external” concept of risk fueled scientific and technological development, which were aimed at harnessing and controlling the powers of nature in order to make human life more secure. But, ironically, advances against the pressures of external risk have caused a new kind of risk to emerge, “manufactured risk.” Manufactured risk consists of the accumulated threat of technological innovation that now structures human social life. “At a certain point,” he writes, “we started worrying less about what nature can do to us, and more about what we have done to nature. This marks the transition from the predominance of external risk to that of manufactured risk.”⁶

Put in a different way, in classic Marxist terms, alterations of the objective material conditions of life always impact both the limits and possibilities of human life. As humans articulate the objective world, they articulate their own subjectivity; technologies fashion selves as they fashion the world.⁷ Though this dynamic has always been opera-

5. Human power’s penetration into human biology leads, in Habermas’s terminology, to the “dedifferentiation” of the objective natural world and the natural conditions of our human subjectivity. See *The Future of Human Nature*. While we have always been a part of nature, we have historically lived as if this were not the case. Our capacities to alter the natural world have been relatively limited, our impact relatively short term, our biological constitution insulated from fundamental alteration.

6. Giddens, *Runaway World*, 26.

7. Of this double articulation of technological power, its reciprocal influence on the world and upon us, philosopher Langdon Winner writes, “. . . technologies are not merely aids to human activity, but also powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning.” See Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 6.

tive, a time of radical power brings it into high relief and makes moral choices more urgent. The “manufactured risk” of which Giddens speaks is the effect of radical human power and factors into the unique moral dilemmas of the environmental crisis.

What comes to view in light of the insights of Giddens and others is a picture of the environmental crisis with multiple overlapping dimensions, each of which presses its own kind of moral and political choices. It is simultaneously global and local, impacting the whole of the biosphere generally but also specific regions in particular ways. It introduces new social problematics, impacting the possibilities, limits, and ethos of human social interaction as well as human interaction with the natural world. The environmental crisis fomenters new political questions as well, concerning how societies ought to be organized around a conception of the common good that includes the good of the natural order in which human societies are embedded.

New economic considerations are generated too. Nature is not an inexhaustible resource and factoring it out as an externality falsifies the actual calculus of production and consumption. And there are of course technical and scientific dimensions to the environmental crisis. New technologies and increasing scientific knowledge of our natural world have led to many good things. But with respect to many of the ecological and biological challenges we face, there is constant debate about whether or not these challenges can be met by yet newer technologies and greater scientific understanding.

These complex, manifold consequences of the crisis of human power are *our* human moral burden in several senses. They are ours because they are of human own making. We have manufactured them and so we are causally responsible for them. They are the effect of an increase in scientific knowledge of nature, the development and impact of powerful technologies that allow humans to control and alter the natural world in unprecedented ways, and a failure to choose responsibly how to direct this knowledge and power. Of course not every individual everywhere is equally a cause of environmental problems, but everyone everywhere is impacted in some way by them and every person has some capacity to effect change in the world.⁸ All humanity

8. Ulrich Beck puts it dramatically: “Until now, all the suffering, all the misery, all the violence inflicted by people on other people recognized the category ‘the Other’—workers, Jews, blacks, asylum seekers, dissidents, and so on—and those appar-

is included in the object of moral consideration that the expansion of power compels us to face—the future of all life.

The moral burden of human power does not belong to a specific place, region, tribe, or nation but to all humans everywhere. In this sense, there are no “outsiders” or “marginalized,” for all humans belong within the orbit of life’s endangerment.⁹ The future of life is now an option that must be chosen. And yet this choice is a distinctly human task, for it is a moral choice and only humans possess the moral and cognitive capacities to make it. So in addition to being causally responsible, humanity is morally responsible for the environmental crisis as well.

This radical extension of human power significantly differentiates the “moral space” of this time from other historical periods.¹⁰ We have crossed a moral threshold from the inevitable fact of limited human incursion into nature to the possibility of nature’s present and future total alteration. Never before has the future of human life on the planet been an object of moral consideration. That there would be a human future has always until now been a secure assumption. Never before has the future of the entirety of the biosphere been an object of moral concern. That there would be a future for *bios*—for all of life—has until now been a shared confidence, not a matter of choice. Understood in these ways, the environmental crisis demands strenuous and concerted ethical thinking leading to responsible moral participation in the natural world.

ently unaffected were safely outside this category. *The advent of nuclear and chemical contamination* [and, he implies, ecological devastation] *has let us experience the “end of the Other,” the end of all our carefully cultivated opportunities for distancing ourselves.”* See “Survival Issues, Social Structure, and Ecological Enlightenment,” in *Ecological Enlightenment*, 27 (italics original).

9. This is of course not to say that ecological degradation is either caused or experienced by all people in the same way. This is emphatically not the case. I simply mean to underline the point that the vulnerability of the natural environment, habitat for the human species among many others, is a broadly human problem.

10. I use the concept “moral space” here in the sense that Charles Taylor uses it in *Sources of the Self*, as an “orientation” that shapes questions about “what is good and bad, what is worth doing and what now, what has meaning and importance . . . and what is trivial and secondary” (28). Part of the usefulness of the concept, as I intend it, is that the spatial metaphor induces moral thinking to move beyond strictly human historical concerns toward a fuller appreciation of our environments, natural and social. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 25–52.

Moral Anthropology and Environmental Ethics

Over the past decades, environmental thinkers and activists have successfully brought the environmental crisis to the attention of many. And yet as German sociologist Ulrich Beck notes, while the precarious state of the natural environment is “accepted in principle, there is still no action, or at best only cosmetic action, taken.”¹¹ There are many reasons for this gulf between perception and action.

For one, the scale of environmental problems is overwhelming and poses a challenge regarding where and how to implement policy. Two other reasons for our moral impotency, related to scale, are causality and accountability. Environmental causality is inherently ambiguous, a puzzle to trace, making it difficult to isolate accountability. Environmental impacts drift, ignoring geopolitical boundaries, crossing public and private sectors. But these sources of inaction are compounded by the internal fragmentation of environmental ethical discourse.

While many environmental thinkers share an ambition to theorize a proper moral relationship between humans and nature, the consensus requisite to effectual response to our environmental challenges is impeded by the conflicting visions among the variety of theories proffered. In short, though environmental thinking has been strenuous, it has not been concerted. Great differences fragment the field. The broader culture’s moral uncertainty and its profuse debating are reflected within environmentalism. Conflict rages to the point of paralyzing constructive practical agendas. The environmental philosopher Bryan Norton, for example, has characterized the recent scene of environmental discourse as a “babble of voices,” as a “cacophony” of worldviews hampering the process of developing and implementing constructive environmental policies.¹²

Isolating a common concern within this cacophony is an important strategy in the effort to clarify it. I hold that one shared concern in environmental ethics revolves around descriptive and normative accounts of the relation between our human moral nature and the broader natural world, what I will commence to refer to as “moral anthropologies.” I would like to stress the *relational* character of what I intend here. With the term “moral anthropology” I do not refer strictly

11. Beck, “Politics in Risk Society,” *Ecological Enlightenment*, 5.

12. Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*, ix.

to an account of human moral nature, or to human moral capacities, though these are features of a moral anthropology. By “moral anthropology” I intend to draw attention to the *relation* between humans and the broader natural world, a relational picture within which description and prescription of this relation circulate and mutually influence one another. That is, a moral anthropological method for environmental ethics describes the human relation to the natural world and informs prescriptions for the way humans ought to relate, for example, to other natural beings, to the evolutionary history of life, and to the broader biophysical environment.

While I take moral anthropology to be a common concern within environmental ethics, even if it is not always explicit, it is manifest as a continuum of positions. The descriptions at either end of this continuum are seemingly irreconcilable. One end of the continuum emphasizes relational continuity between humans and nature, the other discontinuity; while one side understands humanity within nature, the other emphasizes human autonomy and difference. The prescriptions informed by this descriptive continuum also seem to be reversed. Where one end of the continuum can lead to a privileging of the value of natural systems over individuals and species, human and otherwise, the other tends to privilege human value over nature. While one pole affirms humanity’s dependence on the natural, the other generally downplays this. Though the influence of a moral anthropology on the broader ethical system containing it is not always acknowledged, it is of profound normative consequence whether an ethical theory emphasizes a description of human continuity or discontinuity with nature.¹³

By “moral anthropology,” then, I refer to the reciprocal dynamic between moral imperatives for and descriptions of the human relation to nature. Moral anthropology is an object within the field of ethical theory, encompassing descriptions of the human-nature relation and the prescriptive limits and possibilities those descriptions create for

13. Extreme positions on discontinuity, for example, tend to describe nature as radically other, characterizing nature homogeneously as nonhuman. This description leads to some version of an instrumentalist axiology in which nature’s value is based on its availability for human use. On the other hand, positions on continuity reverse these emphases by downplaying human distinctiveness through a naturalization of human moral capacities. At the extreme end of this tendency, human interests and values have no claim to priority over the natural world. Nature is intrinsically valuable, a center of value itself.

what humans ought to be and do in relation to the natural environment. How a moral anthropology is articulated—what is emphasized and what may be neglected, whether it features an understanding of human morality as continuous with the rest of natural life or as marking a strict divide—impacts theories of value and obligation and the feasibility and limitations of policy. Given this, moral anthropologies are bright stars in the various constellations of ethical theory and can serve as a helpful interpretive, comparative, and critical focus of study.¹⁴

While I hold that the interpretive significance of moral anthropology stands for ethical theory in general, this significance is especially pronounced and of enormous practical relevance in the field of environmental ethics. Against the sensibility of many environmental thinkers, I contend that environmental ethics should move towards rather than away from an anthropological focus.

Some environmental thinkers critique any focus on the human as pejoratively anthropocentric. But the automatic assumption that any concern with the human is out of place in environmental thinking radically narrows the field of environmental ethics and minimizes the moral challenges of the environmental crisis. Along with theologian Peter Scott, I understand environmental concern as a human concern, it “is not directed to some abstraction, called Nature. Instead it is directed towards the quality and character of habitation, including the habitation of humanity.”¹⁵ The fundamental concern of environmental thinking, in my judgment, is how morally to live the good and right life in relation to the natural environments that we simultaneously depend upon and threaten.

Humans, then, are central to the project of environmental thought. Because the human is at the center of the environmental crisis, insofar as this crisis is directly related to the extended scale of human power and the rise of moral uncertainty, the human needs to be at the center of an ethical response.

14. Along with religious ethicist Anna Peterson, I affirm that “any idea of human nature has ethical implications and that all ethical systems rest upon certain ideas of human nature.” However, as Peterson notes, this does not mean that anthropology alone is sufficient to the understanding of ethical theories. It suggests instead that as a necessary dimension of ethical theory, granting a measure of critical attention to moral anthropology can advance the understanding of ethical systems. Peterson, *Being Human*, 3.

15. Scott, *Political Theology*, 3.

In light of the moral pressures of the present ethos, environmental ethical thinkers, both philosophers and theologians, urgently need to reexamine some old questions. Questions concerning the character, meaning, and responsibilities of human power and moral agency, questions integral to any account of moral anthropology, need to be faced. Such questions stretch deeply back into human history. But the reach and magnitude of human power has changed and thus makes these questions more urgent.

Like all living beings, humans influence the world around them. Humans have always had a greater capacity to impact the world than other species, but the capacities we now possess outstrip all previous historical periods. If the ethos of this age is defined at least in large measure by the human capacity radically to change the natural environment, then a concern with moral anthropology seems to have an important place in contemporary environmental ethical theory and practice.

A moral anthropological method for environmental ethics is also requisite today because the traditionally assumed divide between humans and the rest of nature has been severely challenged in the last century and a half by work in the biological and ecological sciences. The human relation to nature has always been and is continually being redescribed. Certainly humans are social beings, inhabiting cultures, building and critiquing institutions, living in response to and making history. But humans are also beings of and in nature. The scale of human efficacy and the choices humans make and fail to make impact the present and future of humanity, the present and future of all life, and require critical ethical consideration in light of the changing understandings of the human relation to the natural world.

Since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, many traditional understandings of the human relation to nature have been called into question. The assumption of radical human discontinuity with the natural world has largely been replaced by a concern with how to understand humans in relation to other forms of life. Given current scientific knowledge, it is difficult if not irresponsible to maintain the position of a thinker even as great as Rabbi Abraham Heschel. For Heschel, "We can attain adequate understanding of man only if we think of man in human terms, *more humano*, and abstain from employing categories

developed in the investigation of lower forms of life.”¹⁶ To claim to the contrary that an adequate moral anthropology requires employing the insights of the biological sciences need not be viewed as a degradation of humanity.

Why should humans be ashamed of kinship with other animals, or our relation to the supposedly “lower” forms of life? Is it possible to understand either “being human” or “human being” in isolation from the human habitat?¹⁷ Heschel’s claim betrays a morally troubling, historically deep descriptive and axiological dualism between humans and the rest of nature, as well perhaps as a warranted critique of overzealous scientific reductionism.

Appropriate in response to Heschel is the claim of philosopher Mary Midgley that the proper question to ask nowadays is not what distinguishes humans *from* other animals but what distinguishes us *among* them.¹⁸ It is impossible to deny that humans are animals, in addition to everything else we may be. Whatever we focus on as distinctive about our nature, whether reason, language, or our moral capacities, needs to be understood “not against the laws of our nature, but according to them.”¹⁹ While Darwin’s work initiated a revolution in our understanding of human nature, debate continues to rage about its philosophical, ethical, and religious implications. That we are natural beings is granted. But the question of our precise location on the continuum between continuity and discontinuity with nature and the normative significance of this question remain open to debate. What is the role of genes in human nature and behavior? What is the role of culture in how we identify ourselves as agents, in what we value, in the practical moral character of our lives? To refer to the biologist E.O. Wilson’s evocative metaphor, is there a genetic “leash” on culture, and if so, what length?²⁰ If it is crucial to consider human distinctiveness in accord with the

16. Heschel, *Who is Man?* 3.

17. With this question I refer to Heschel’s distinction between *human being* and *being human*. *Human being* for Heschel is a category within the class of animals, but *being human* for him is irreducible to this status. The question I raise here, contra Heschel, is whether whatever it is that one takes to be distinctive about *being human* can be understood or have meaning in isolation from the animal nature of *human being*.

18. See Midgley, *Beast and Man* and *The Ethical Primate*.

19. Midgley, *The Ethical Primate*, 24.

20. See Wilson, *On Human Nature*, 167.

natural laws of nature, as Midgley suggests, what measure of control and degree of influence do these laws exert?

In thinking through the questions of human power and moral uncertainty through a moral anthropological framework, it is important to try to balance human continuity *and* discontinuity with nature. Against the tendency to emphasize one pole of this continuum over the other, an effort must be made to hold the insights of both views together. For even if humans are a particular mammalian species of animal in continuity with other evolved forms of life, we possess important species-typical characteristics that must be considered if we are really to know ourselves. Evolutionary continuity does not warrant but rather challenges biotic sameness. To disregard human difference is to disregard the insights of biological theory about the typical characteristics of our species and is just as biologically misinformed as a stress on radical discontinuity.

But such disregard for human distinctiveness is much more than a descriptive problem. It is most of all a deeply moral one. Disregarding human difference naïvely neglects the unique and empirically undeniable capacities of the human species to alter the world more radically than any other animal. While every animal of course exerts an environmental impact, only humans face the moral choice of whether to change totally, even to destroy the whole planet. The pressure of this moral choice suggests that a central ethical task of this time is to theorize the human relationship with the larger natural environment without eclipsing the enormous practical relevance of human distinctiveness. What is needed, against the tendencies to prioritize either continuity or discontinuity, is a moral anthropology that holds together commonality and distinctiveness. As will soon be explained, the work of Hans Jonas and James Gustafson provide suggestive resources for a moral anthropology that dialectically affirms continuity and discontinuity, both kinship with and differences from other forms of life.

For this reason and others, responding to the environmental crisis entails entering the “tangled bank” of scientific, philosophical, and theological discourses about the human moral relation to the natural world. This interdisciplinarity is a reflection of the fact that knowing what humans are and who we can be as moral beings is of necessity a multiperspectival task, relating to the various dimensions of human experience and to the various natural and cultural tributaries of the hu-