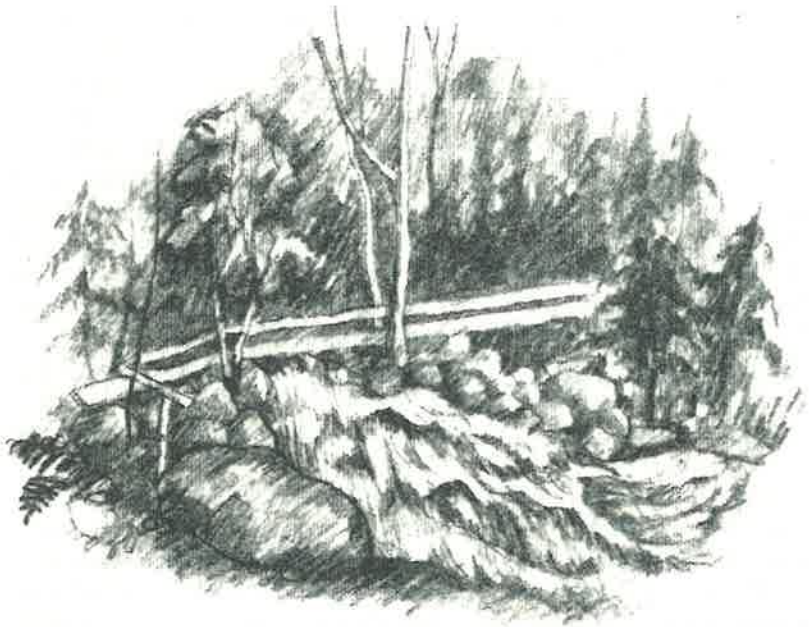

A Human's Place in Nature

There still is dawn, beneath the old dam, where the bright new growth heals the scars left by the loggers, and the dweller awakens into it, a stranger no longer.

At dawn this morning I watched the old porcupine cross the river on the log footbridge I had laid, meandering, boulder to boulder, across the stream. Porcupines, like most forest creatures, can swim. I have seen one tumble into the water when the stream was in flood and regain the shore a few yards downstream with purposeful strokes. Still, they prefer to avoid it if they can. I have never seen any of the land animals enter water voluntarily. Though the raccoon loves sardines

passionately, even a freshly opened can of them would not induce him to swim the stream. Now he and the porcupine make use of my footbridge, a part of my human world. An artifact of my thought and labor has become a part of their natural world, much as the lake backed up by the beaver dam is a part of mine. They come to dig in my compost pile, as I in turn have bucked and burned the butts of oaks felled and left by beavers after they had limbed the tops to build their dam and lodge. I have come to belong in this world, not because I have become less human but because this world is far more human than I once realized. When humans surrender the arrogance of domination, they can reclaim the confidence of their humanity. Nature, freed from the constraint of mechanical nature-constructs, can accept the human as also a part of its moral order.

That recognition, to be sure, comes slowly. When humans first begin to rediscover the world of nature, they do so, for the most part, in a mode of self-negation, as if they sensed a basic disjunction between their humanity and the order of nature around them. Much of the writing that seeks to rediscover the natural world, whether conservationist or romantic, is tinged with an undertone of hostility to humans and all their works. It is as if the "world of nature" meant a world freed of human presence, and respect for nature a withdrawal from it. That is the obverse of the arrogance of our humanity and leads to the conclusion that the moral duty of humans is one of minimizing their presence until such time as the human species will finally disappear from the face of this earth, letting nature reclaim it. Just as nature appears nonhuman to human arrogance, so humans themselves appear unnatural to human diffidence.

That conclusion is understandable enough as long as the basic metaphor of human presence is the bulldozer—and in our time that metaphor may well be appropriate. Still, it is not a particularly helpful conclusion, offering as it does no guidance for our being in nature. If being human were in itself an unnatural, unjustifiable intrusion into nature, the sole course of action—short of the demise of the human species at one extreme and the total displacement of nature by an artificial environment at the other—would be one of apartheid, dividing the globe between artifact areas reserved for humans and natural areas from which humans would be rigorously excluded. The polarization between Manhattan minus its parks and wilderness preserves minus hikers foreshadows that approach. Were culture a negation of nature, no integration of humans and nature would be possible.

That is not a happy conclusion, but neither is it a necessary one. The opposition of nature and culture which we take for granted is

itself a cultural product, the result of a skewed perspective which identifies "culture" with that branch of the entertainment industry [*sic*] which caters to the tastes of the educated and the affluent urbanite, specifically in the area of the arts.[1] The term and the concept of culture, however, have very different roots. Culture is a matter of cultivation, echoing the Latin *cultus,* the yielding of respect, honoring the sacredness of all that is. The man of culture is one who cultivates, who honors the nobility of being. The husbandman is a man of culture, as words like agriculture and silviculture remind us, cultivating the field and the forest. The *homo humanus* of ancient Rome, the man of culture, is one who cultivates his life, not leaving it at the mercy of his momentary whims and their gratification but ordering it according to its moral sense. His task, like that of the husbandman and of all men of culture, is not an arbitrary one, displacing nature. Nature is his guide in the task of cultivation. That is *cultus*—and, in that sense, culture is not the contradiction of nature but rather the task of humans within it.[2]

If, in the course of the last three centuries, we have become increasingly marauders on the face of the earth rather than dwellers therein, it is not because we have become more distinctively human, more distinctively cultured, but rather because we have become less so. What is distinctively human about us is our ability to perceive the moral law in the vital order of nature, subordinating greed to love. In the last three centuries, however, we have guided our dealings with the world less and less by moral considerations and more and more by considerations of short-term utility—gratification of greed. In the process, we have become less human, less cultured, more "bestial" in the commonsense acceptation of that term. If we are to recover the confidence of our intrinsic place in nature, we need to do so by reclaiming, not by rejecting, our distinctive moral humanity, our task of cultivating the earth as faithful stewards. For humans, it is precisely culture, in its most basic sense of cultivation, of care and respect, not bestiality, that can be the way to reclaiming our place in nature. It is as beings capable of seeing our place in nature from a moral point of view that we can cease being marauders and can become dwellers in the earth.

Placing the question of our being in nature within the perspective of a moral law, however, raises a more fundamental question still, one which we could ignore within a solely utilitarian perspective. It is the question of the ultimate justification of being human as such. A reaffirmation of the moral sense of nature and of the moral sense of being

human resolves the alienation between humans and nature, but it obliges us to ask what justifies our presence on this earth at all, since that presence is no longer merely a fact but also a moral problem.[3]

It is an expensive presence by any account, and would be so even if we broke free of our all-devouring greed and contented ourselves with the satisfaction of need.[4] Given my scant fur, I must consume nearly four tight cords of good seasoned hardwood to keep warm through a New Hampshire winter—and that is only the beginning. Though I went about it in a circumspect, cellophane-wrapped fashion, I was a predator, feeding on the flesh of my fellow creatures. Even once I opted for a vegetarian diet—after all, I do have molars as well as canines—I was still competing for food with my fellow creatures. Nor is the cost of my sustenance restricted to the modest use of the fruits of this earth with which the native American was content. I am by far the most expensive member of the community of nature. What is it that justifies the expense?

For some three centuries, we have had a ready answer—we are a "higher" species, the only intelligent beings in a world of dead matter. That arrogance, though, is today devastating us as much as we have devastated the world in its name. That is what brings us, literally or metaphorically, to the forest clearing, to seek a new beginning. Once, however, we give up that arrogance, then the answer to the question, What justifies the expense? is no longer obvious.

Are we a "higher" species? A disinterested observer, coolly examining the evidence and assessing humanity's impact upon the globe, would not be likely to come to that conclusion. The works of humans have left a trail of devastation across the face of the earth. Nor have we served our own kind well. Even without invoking mushroom clouds, the daily inhumanity of humans to each other makes any claim to superiority suspect. Porcupines do not covet, they bear no false witness, they do not commit adultery and they do no murder. How can we claim superiority? At best, we are one species among others. But then, what justifies the totally disproportionate cost of our presence?

Ask it for once without presupposing the answer of the egotism of our species, as God might ask it about his creatures: Why should a dog or a guinea pig die an agonizing death in a laboratory experiment so that some human need not suffer just that fate? Would not any answer you give justify experimentation on carefully selected classes of humans—convicts were occasionally used, Watson used foundling children—as well? Why, in the perspective of eternity, should the life of a human be more precious than that of a dog? Why should the dog's suffering weigh any less in the moral balance of the cosmos? Why

should a woodchuck die, wasted by the side of the highway, just so that a human should not be inconvenienced in his headless rush to nowhere? As long as we inflict suffering only on our own kind whom we exploit for pleasure or profit, we can obscure the issue with the specious doctrine of "consenting adults," though even that is problematic. Have the wretched of this earth really consented to penury so that the privileged segment of humanity can choke on idle affluence? With animals, caught up in our works and wars, tortured in our experiments, that is not even a question. Animals cannot consent. They suffer mutely, trusting those who can speak and decide for them.

As step by step I found my way gratefully into the peace of the forest, feeling it healing my wounds and offering me a place of belonging, I became ever more painfully aware of that question: What justifies my presence in this peaceful world, what justifies the cost of my upkeep, so disproportionately higher than that of the other animals? That question is inseparable from the gift of the moral sense of nature. It is all around me, not as an accusation but as an unspoken query: How are humans justified?

For, irrational though it may seem, unwarranted and unmerited, we *are* justified. That is a fundamental experience. In a world where a layer of artifacts obscures the living sense of nature, the issue may seem moot. To Sartre, the intensely moral observer of an amoral world, a negative answer seemed evidently true. In his literary metaphors, even more than in his philosophical ones, Sartre powerfully articulated the corrosive sense of being always *in the way*, unjustified and unjustifiable.[5] His is surely a faithful reflection of the position of a moral subject in a mechanical world. Within the brackets of the forest clearing, however, just the opposite truth stands out. In the stillness of the evening, amid the sun-drenched hum of the noonday forest, in the grandeur of the lightning, there comes the overwhelming, agonizing, and reconciling recognition of being accepted, being justified. Here the dweller is an alien no longer. Nature envelops and accepts him. There is no reason, no merit, only the basic reality: we are justified, we are accepted. It is not because of what we do: given the devastation we have wrought among our fellow creatures, it can only be in spite of it. It is a free gift, agonizing for being so painfully undeserved. Nature accepts freely, as the dog who licks the hand of the experimenter who had subjected it to inhuman torture forgives freely, as a gift. Though again and again we wound the world around us, nature heals and accepts. Though we merit only condemnation, and cannot presume

to claim the gifts of life, trusting in our own righteousness, we are yet justified, we belong.[6]

It is not easy to describe the sense of being forgiven. The sense of the utter violence of my presence haunted me for many years. For several months, while I shaped the beams for my house, I lived in the clearing quietly, unobtrusively. I came to know its moods, the wonder of the early morning, when I came out of my tent while the dew was still on the grass, watching the first yellow and orange flames in my fire ring. The wood I culled did not bother me—it was a part of the life of the forest whose trees do live and die. Digging the cellar was different. The backhoe ripped the earth, violated its centuries-old contours and left a scar of dead sand all around my future house. Building the house was again good—I sensed my kinship with the creatures who make their homes around me. The scar, the scar of dead sand, harsh and unhealing, remained to reproach me, a metaphor of violence. I could have done little else, yet I came to regret the decision to build. Only slowly the foregiveness came. Perhaps it began the day a great old turtle climbed up on the scar. She poked here and there, testing the sand with her flippers. Then slowly, deliberately, she dug herself into the sun-soaked sand bank. She paid me no mind for an hour or more while she laid her eggs. At last she was finished, covered over the hole and crawled, exhausted, into the shade of a bush where she rested until the cool of the evening. Then she disappeared into the river. There was forgiveness in her coming.

Next spring, after tracks leading down to the river told me that the eggs had hatched, I finally covered up the scar, digging up rich loam from the long-ago lake bed, setting up hemlock stumps for walks and enriching the new soil with oak leaves and chicken manure. By the fall, clover and rye grass had healed the scar. The clearing blended back into the forest. The grass worked a work of forgiving. The grass here is no less a metaphor than the forgiving, and the sense it presents is unambiguous. It would be folly were we to trust in our own righteousness. We are not worthy, our presence is too costly. But there is manifold and great mercy. The grass testifies to it no less than the rainbow. Irrational though it may seem, we are justified. The realization is as painful as it is reconciling: it is always easier to be damned and done with it. Still, it is inescapable. We are accepted.

Granted, that deep, self-certifying awareness is not yet an answer. It is a poetic gift of the all-reconciling night, at best only marginally legitimate in philosophic reflection. The work of thought is yet to come: the primordial awareness in a forest clearing is no more than a token. Still, it is not irrelevant. It is the warrant of reality, the assurance

that our reflection is indeed an articulation of a deep truth, not merely a cunningly devised fable in which humans seek to rationalize their being. We reflect and speculate, as surely we must. In the peace of the evening, though, we are also ourselves eyewitnesses. The audacious recognition that we belong, that we are accepted, justified, is not the conclusion. It is the starting point, the primordial given. Though so much more needs be said, that initial recognition assures us that more *can* be said—and will not be idle speculation.

Reflection begins when the awareness turns into a question: How is it that human presence on this earth is justified? Then the answer can come, first on the most elementary level: humans are justified in the order of being. Humans are—and to be is to be good. That is the deep, difficult insight of Saint Augustine, *esse qua esse bonum est,* being is good simply because it is. Saint Augustine's words of long ago have faded into a formula, a conceptual counter in the game of metaphysics, no longer evoking a lived experience. We have seen too much of the grievous harm that beings cause one another in the order of time to retain a clear awareness of their intrinsic goodness simply in the order of being. Both in the order of time and in the conceptual game of speculation, Saint Augustine's claim might well appear false.

The stillness of the evening, suspending the preoccupations of the order of time, brings forth once more the long-obscured goodness of the order of being, not as a speculative conclusion but as a lived experience. There is the ageless, lichen-covered boulder at the foot of the dam. I had long taken it for granted, unheeding. Only slowly did I begin to realize how intensely, fundamentally good it is that the boulder *is,* that there is something when there could so easily be only the vast emptiness of nothing. The boulder does not *do.* Its presence in the order of being is unobscured by the preoccupations of doing in the order of time. Humans do obscure it. When, though, the dusk suspends human doing and solitude brackets chatter, when the pain of loss reminds us how easy it is not to be, then the lichen-covered boulder stands out in its deep goodness. It is good that it is. In the same vein, William Carlos Williams wrote in his haiku, "so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow. . . ."[7] That is the goodness whereof Saint Augustine spoke.

Snakes, too, help recall the goodness of being. They have had a bad press, yet of all the creatures of the field, stream, and forest they are perhaps the most peaceful—and most shy. Only when most fortunate do I come across one, as it reposes motionless on the sun-warmed

boulders in the stream or in the old stone fence. My ancestors once believed that a snake under the threshold guarded the welfare of a dwelling, and I can empathize. The snakes of New England are, for the most part, considered common. The colors of their scales are muted, matching the tint of their habitat. Humans rarely see the brightly colored underside of their lithe bodies. The snakes, I know, have their place in the order of time. Still, watching a snake resting in the sun, motionless as he lest I startle him, I am little aware of that role. Something else impresses itself on me—how infinitely good it is that there is a snake, how utterly good in the order of being it is that this snake *is*. The idea of a "value-free" reality is a hopeless fiction, constructed by beings who think themselves the source of all value. The lived reality is different. It is good, deeply good, not in terms of its function but simply in terms of its being.

It is good that humans are, too. They are so absorbed in the order of time, obscured by the good or ill of what they do, that it is hard to grasp the goodness of their being. Still, there are glimpses. Late last night I heard the sound of a motor overhead, a slow, rhythmic throbbing. Then the red and green running lights of a small plane appeared over the tree line and moved slowly overhead. I could imagine the pilot in the darkened cabin, isolated by the throbbing of his engine, in the eerie green glow of his dials. The rim of the clearing, dark against the sky, bracketed him: though theoretically I knew that he had taken off somewhere, perhaps after dinner, and would land somewhere else, where others were waiting for him, in that moment he had for me neither a past nor a future. He simply was, suspended for the moment between my clearing and the vastness of space, and I sensed keenly how precious, how good it is that a person *is*.

So I, too, *am*, still before the house, beneath the stars, watching the dying embers of the fire, justified, like the boulder and the snake, simply by the fact of my being. When Hegel declared that whatever is real is rational, he had, I am sure, something else in mind—perhaps that there is sufficient reason for whatever comes to pass in the order of time. His words, though, can be used to point to something in the order of being as well: that the sheer givenness of being is good. In the order of being, the fact that something *is* justifies its being.

That is the level of justification which humans can reclaim when they become aware of their being simply as a fact, a sheer psychophysical presence. That is the kernel of truth even in all that we have come to think of as "materialism," in spite of the inherent contradiction in the formal conception of a meaningful idea of a merely material reality. It is the truth of the lived realization of our sheer "material"

presence—or, in another idiom, our presence simply in the order of being. Like the growing and living beings around us, we are also in the order of time, projecting our being as temporality, spanning a duration from hope to fulfillment, in memory and anticipation. Then, in our ability to encounter the good, the true, and the beautiful, we are also beings who transcend temporality in a vision of the order of the eternal.[8]

The fact of being, the flow of time, the vision of eternity—those are the three orders. Whenever in its long history philosophy confounded them, it ended up in a dilemma, just as when it sought to isolate one of them as alone real. The recognition of the goodness of being is crucial, yet not sufficient. As humans, we are—but we also do, and our acts do not simply happen. We need to envision alternatives and choose among them—and our choice can make the difference between a forest culled, clear-cut, or bulldozed and asphalted for a parking lot. Our being is also intrinsically temporal, an act and a process as well as a fact.

Here, again, more is also true. We are not wholly enclosed in time. In the still vision of the green depth of the midday forest, in the stark confrontation with the January moon and the flash of lightning which fix the absolute value of a moral act, we are also beings who encounter the eternal in time. Still, the recognition of the temporality of animate being is crucial. It is the periodicity of being which presents us with the first awareness of its *rightness,* of the moral sense of life in which there is room for everything but not just anything, is appropriate at any given time.

In contrast with the pretemporal—broadly, the "materialistic"—perspective, the temporalistic vision is immensely appealing. When humans seek to answer the question, "Who are you?," they may begin with a statement of "fact"—the "name, rank, serial number" of a bygone era—but they must go on to tell the story of their lives, their memories, their present activities, their hopes and anticipations. The being of nature is no less intrinsically temporal: the oak bears the sapling within it, the beaver his ancestral memories, the human his history, all striving toward a future. The rediscovery of the moral sense of nature and the place of the human within it begins with the discovery of the rhyme and rhythm, the purposeful periodicity of being. Temporalistic perspectives, just as the materialistic ones, will always appear convincing because, on one level, they, too, are fundamentally *true.*

We have not yet begun to exhaust the resources of the temporalistic perspectives. They have a double contribution to make. One is the insight of romantic naturalism and vitalism, that there is indeed a

rightness of the seasons and that the seeming arbitrariness and relativity of human values dissolve, revealing the *logos,* the *ratio,* of being human when humans realize that for them, as for the growing, living, and dying beings around them, there is a right time, that there is a rightness of time for everything. In its vitalistic and developmental guises, temporalism can teach us that.[9]

That is a difficult lesson, because the sheer goodness of all that is is so basic, yet it is a crucial one, because without it the sense of the intrinsic goodness of being would become paralyzing. It is the callousness of sentimentality rather than the putative rapacity of reason that brings it home most clearly. For years, the National Park Service made a practice of culling the herds of wild horses in the Grand Canyon. Perhaps a decade or so ago, the practice aroused public indignation, including mine. I can remember the pictures of the magnificent, free animals transformed by a single rifle shot into pained and bloody wreckage to be sold for dog food. I remember the pain at the thought and the immense sense of relief upon reading that the practice had been terminated. But the story did not end there. The herds, with few natural enemies, multiplied precipitously, far too fast for the fragile ecosystem of the canyon. In a few years, its vegetation was devastated, its hoof-beaten slopes eroding, starving burros dying painfully each winter. Though the devastation was far greater, this time there was no outcry of indignation.

Logging forced me to accept the same lesson. When I first came to the land, it had lain fallow ever since the last dwellers abandoned it, nearly three generations ago. The forest that reclaimed the pastures had not been planted or sowed. It grew wild, choking upon itself. There were trees dying for want of sunlight, others reaching heights of thirty feet or more on a three-inch butt, then breaking under the weight of January ice. There were few healthy trees in the tangle.

Still, for a long time, I could not undertake the task of thinning. Coming from the world of artifacts and constructs, where acres of asphalt ruthlessly stifle a soil stripped of loam and gravel, I lacked the confidence of my human presence. Bruised myself from a shipwreck, I wished only to be inconspicuous, to disturb as little as possible. The wonder of the woods was upon me, newly received, and I could understand respect in no way other than by withdrawing my presence to a minimum.

The trauma of the first night after the loggers came is still with me. I walked out by moonlight but could no longer find my familiar paths amid the tangle of wasted tops and slash. I wandered through the wounded forest, grieving my decision. Yet where only a tangled bush

had been, there are now young oak saplings, growing straight and true. The starved, slender trunks are filling in and putting out healthy branches. There is a cluster of shoots around each maple stump: I no longer hesitate in pruning them back and selecting the strongest. And there are mushrooms, *hříbky* and *křemenáče,* where the sun is warming the forest floor again.

It is a difficult lesson, one which I will never learn gladly, and a dangerous one as well. Utility can so easily excuse rapacity and cruelty. A horror came over me when a neighbor concluded he would have to shoot his dog, who had become rabid—and several bystanders pressed in, eyes agleam, "Let me shoot him!" "No, let me!" Yet that scene is reenacted daily, on small scale as well as grand. Judgments of relative value can finally be legitimate only against the background of the recognition of absolute value in the order of being—the recognition that, though the culling of the herd may be necessary in the order of time, the death of a wild horse remains tragic in the order of eternity. Values of utility, finally, are just that, not values of goodness. The works of destruction can never be justified as good, only as the bitter work of love. The callousness of utility is as morally abhorrent as the paralysis of sentimentality.

Still, it is a lesson we have to learn. For better or for worse, we have become a part of the balance of nature and can no longer simply withdraw. We must bear the responsibility of stewards, daring to make decisions and learning to recognize that there is not only the absolute value of being, but also the relative value of beings in the order of time. It is easy to become rapacious marauders in the process. It is, however, not inevitable if we learn to know and respet the rightness of time, the rightness of the season.

Temporalism, understanding the relative value of utility, helps us understand that. Had we but the absolute value of the order of being and the moral command of the order of eternity to guide us, we should remain paralyzed. Choices are possible because of the relative good and evil of the order of time.

The second valuable insight of temporalism, this time in its progressivist and historicist guise, is the opposite recognition, that so much of the evil, so much of the suffering to which humankind have for generations resigned themselves, is in truth not at all inevitable, that the passage of time can actually make a difference. Here the example of empirical medicine, with its stubborn refusal to accept as inevitable all the ills to which the flesh is heir, is perhaps the least controversial. But there are also the more controversial examples of men like Henry Ford or Tomáš Baťa,[10] who refused to accept the age-old verity that

the laboring classes must remain forever condemned to the poverty of producing goods which only their "betters" could purchase, and who staked their fortunes on paying a wage which would enable their workers to become the purchasers of their own products. Or conversely, even Marxism, though it has spawned so much suffering and sorrow, can still awaken hope in Latin America because of its one crucial article of faith, that grief and injustice are not inevitable, that life can be better than it is. It matters little that it is the Western working man rather than the regimented subject of the Soviet empire, nominally Marxist, who lends credibility to that faith. What is crucial is the basic temporalist conviction that time is real, that it makes a difference, and that the future can be better than the perennial present.

That, finally, is the double insight of all temporalism—the vitalistic recognition that there is not only absolute, but also relative value, inhering in what from an absolute perspective appears as no more than passing and perishing, and the historicist recognition that, within the parameters of relative value, there is hope: things can be better than they are, human effort can make a difference. Those are not simply speculative abstractions. They are appealing less because of the arguments advanced in their support than because of their immediate experiential truth. In a hundred daily actions, what redeems us from the sense of ultimate futility of the order of time with its knowledge that the house I build will decay and fall, the love I cherish will pass in time, is the vitalist recognition that in spite of its absolute futility it is all still relatively good, intensely good in its season. Similarly, it is the historicist hope that the grief of the present can and will be redeemed by a future fulfillment, that sustains us even in the tedium of everydayness. Purpose can be a substitute for absolute sense.

Within these parameters a far more significant answer to the question of the worth of being human becomes possible than the merely factual justifiction that humans in fact are, real at least as much as "real socialism" is real, and so presumably also "rational," justified. On the level of the act rather than merely the fact of being human we can say that humans are worth the cost of their sustenance because they are the *beings capable of doing good.* Humans can sustain each other and other beings in pain, sorrow, and distress. To be sure, other animals can do that as well: I have watched a hen mother orphaned ducklings or one of the dogs who live with me comfort the other when he came home with a bullet in his paw and his lip viciously torn. Yet human capacity for alleviating suffering is much greater. The miracle of verbal communication virtually abolishes all limits on the range of empathy. Humans can share joy and sorrow, they can enrich the present with

memories and sustain it with hope. The twin gift and achievement, the wonder of science and the marvel of technology, give us the possibility of rendering our presence on this earth benign. We have the capability, perhaps for the first time in our history, to safeguard nature, our shared inheritance, for all its creatures, and to alleviate massively its vast surplus of pain. That in fact we have used our potential heedlessly and destructively is true enough but not ultimately to the point. What is crucial is that we have the ability to do the good and that, if we choose to use it, it is capable of justifying our presence on this earth and at the same time of giving direction to our individual lives. There is, potentially, a source of the confidence of being human in the ability to do good. The recognition that being is also time and that time—or better, acts in time—can make a difference does represent a crucial insight. Humans are justified by their ability to do good.

Still, even that is not enough. The problem is not simply that the track record of temporalistic philosophies is most ambiguous, though it is certainly that. It would not be easy to argue that human life on this earth has become unambiguously more humane because of the technological advances in which the Henry Fords and the Tomáš Baťas of this world placed such well-intended confidence—or that human presence on this globe has become more justifiable because of them. At the other end of the temporalist spectrum, Marxism, for its part, has aroused immense hopes but produced a self-perpetuating nightmare.

The problem of principle, though, is more basic than all such problems in fact. It is that *relative* value, the great positive discovery of all temporalistic perspectives, is *absolutely* absurd. The existentialists and their heirs, the "greens" of our time among them, became agonizingly aware of the vast absurdity of a life whose meaningfulness is predicated on "progress." Only in a most myopic perspective does life become meaningful by virtue of being used as a means to something whose value is in turn solely instrumental. The infinite instrumental regress which the nineteenth century regarded as progress is coming to appear increasingly as the "rat race." No less so the generation which grew up in central Europe under Soviet rule is painfully aware of the hollowness of the "triumphant march of the proletariat" toward ever greater affluence.

Here it is crucial to tread humbly. In truth, as beings whose being is projected into temporality, we humans can claim no status more special than the raccoons, the porcupines, and the woodchucks we slaughter with our motorcars. The good of which we are capable in

the order of time may be quantitatively greater, but so is the evil we in fact do. If we can claim a qualitative difference for our species, it is not its role in time but its ability to stand out into eternity. Humans are the beings who can recognize, in the flux of time, the intersecting dimension of the eternal. There is beauty, beauty *ab solo,* in the fragile wonder of the first trillium—yet that beauty will dissipate and perish with the order of time unles a human pauses over it in grateful wonder. There is a truth and a goodness of being which will dissipate and perish—but for the humans who can honor it, acting in ways which are wholly irrational in the order of time but bring into that order the eternal rationality of the categorical imperative. It is the humans who are willing to suffer and to die—needlessly, as time judges need—so that the goodness, the truth and the beauty of the eternal, would not perish but would rise to eternal validity. It is Václav Benda, recently released after serving a four-year prison term because he refused to collaborate with the political police, saying simply, "There is this commandment, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness.' "[11] It is all those who choose to live in truth, Šimsa, Bonhoffer, Niemöller, Patočka, the millions of nameless, unnoted others who have suffered and died—and often far less dramatically, who have *lived*—so that the good, the true, the beautiful will not dissipate unnoted into the cosmos. They are the salt of the earth. It is they who anchor our chains of instrumental value in absolute worth. It is they, too, who remind us of the full and specific sense of our humanity and our place in the cosmos, as the beings who, living at the intersection of time and eternity, can bring the eternal into time—and raise time to eternity.

That eternity is not an "other" realm, discontinuous with the order of time, nor an infinite prologation of it. It really does ingress in time, reorienting the moment from its horizontal matrix of the before and after to a vertical one of good and evil. To me, lightning became the most vivid metaphor of that ingression. In the solitude of the rain-drenched forest, it is an awesome phenomenon. I would sit in the doorway, staring into the darkness. The clearing, usually starlit, would be immersed in darkness under the heavy overcast: I could not even distinguish the edge of the tree line. Then suddenly, without warning, the whole clearing would be illuminated in a pale violet light, every detail clear, cut off sharply from the invisible "before" and "after," frozen in an absolute presence, utterly still. I don't think I have ever seen movement by lightning. That may seem possible in an urban context where the moment of illumination, though far brighter, is continuous with the neon-lit flow of time, not cut off by intense darkness from the before and the after. Here the thunderclouds and

the heavy rain extinguish all residual glow. The darkness is total, masking all continuity. The flash of lightning presents a moment of the world's being taken out of the context of its temporality, present *ab solo*. The metaphor has its limitations, but the experience is a powerful one. It is the overwhelming recognition that being cannot be contained in time.

The categories of the "temporal" and the "eternal," though barely philosophically intelligible today, remain indispensible. The temporal perspective of a sequence of events, the preceding determining that which comes after, does create the illusion of being as wholly contained in time, merely natural in the reductive sense of that term. Drifting with the flow of time, humans can perceive their acts as "perfectly understandable" quite independently of their moral worth. So, presumably, can animals, though they may not articulate that awareness conceptually. By contrast, the recognition that something may be perfectly understandable and yet be *wrong* is a distinctively human recognition, cutting across the flow of temporal reasoning with the vertical slash of moral insight. Here eternity, the perennial, atemporal vision of the ideal, enters temporality so that we can, legitimately, speak of the human as the being who lives at the intersection of two dimensions, the temporal dimension of nature and the value dimension of eternity.

It is as dwellers in time that humans find their place in nature; it is as bearers of eternity that they find their justification. So stated, though, though properly inspirational, that insight remains so distant from the lived reality of it, from the tangible goodness of white birches and of drawing water at dusk to water the caraway, the dill, and the peas that are just putting out first blossoms. The miracle of incarnation is not abstract; it is as tangible as the labor in which love becomes embodied and comes to belong, from eternity to earth, but not just earth in general, but to this spread of land, to these boulders, to these trees, to this river.

The mystery of incarnation, enacted in every stroke of the hoe which makes this land mine and which makes me no less its own husbandman, may be a stumbling block because it is acted out in such earthy ways, in belonging, and belonging is so perilously difficult to distinguish from having—and having can so easily become a substitute for being.[12]

When humans attempt to leave the lockstep of greed and gratification and reach out for a different dimension of being human, they, like Saint Francis before them, inevitably know the longing to leave all thought of having behind. As it is tempting in the order of time to

avoid the guilt of doing by abstaining from acting, so in the order of being it is tempting to avoid the burden of having by abstaining from it. Greed, the twin brother of pride, has ever been the driving force of the most destructive and self-destructive human acts. The logic is familiar enough: in their pride, humans seek to dominate their world, to possess it, free to use or abuse, destroy and alienate it as they see fit. Again and again, they have in fact succeeded in alienating it, though not in the sense intended by the old Austrian civil code which so defined ownership. Whatever I come to possess, to dominate, be it a tool, an animal, or a fellow human being, can no longer be a companion. It becomes alien. The world humans master, though they may claim to own it, does not become their own, belonging to them in the intimate sense in which a father belongs to a son or a husband to a wife. The possessed world becomes a dead world in our hands, lifeless and meaningless.

In a sense, the utter absurdity of having, conceived as a task and a goal of being, may be one of the most valuable lessons which successful consumerism has to teach a humankind conditioned by millennia of want to consider possession the fulfillment of life. The accumulation of artifacts that never become our own is evident in our garage sales: an incredible clutter of gewgaws, each representing an investment of life and labor never repaid in use, is laid out as unwanted burden. It is seldom the small, cherished possessions, companions of a lifetime, that appear on the tables. Typically, it is high-cost items, a rusty LP grill, seen on a television, bought on an impulse, used once, then stored away; alpine skis with rigid plastic boots, built to peak competition standards, then bought by someone who thought it might be fun to try skiing. From the latest electronic gadgets to fourth husbands, they are items bought in the illusion that possession can mean fulfillment—and unceremoniously discarded when the illusion bursts. We are hopelessly burdened by excess possessions, closets of once-worn clothes, and yet we build more closets to fill, afraid that if our lives lost the purpose of acquisition they would have no purpose at all.

It is not surprising that the rebelling children of affluence can be so easily persuaded that private property is the root of all evil and led to project as their vision of the Kingdom a condition they think "natural"—one in which the world would belong only to God or to an anonymous "all," while each human, unburdened by possessions, would contribute his all to a common store while drawing from it what he thinks he needs. They will not be dissuaded by the recognition that animals in fact have their cherished belongings and defend them fiercely, nor by the nightmare of alienation which that vision has wrought

among humans. A different truth presses in on them—the depersonalization of humans and nature alike by the quest for possession.[13]

The conflict they are experiencing is once more the intrinsic conflict between love and instrumentality, though on a deeper level—the conflict of being and having to which neither the solution of poverty nor that of affluence can be consistently applied. We are incarnate beings: for us, having and being are inseparable. To be at all means to have a body and a place in the world which are my own. The slave who cannot call even his body his own is not more free for having been "freed from the burden of possession" any more than the farmer reduced to an employee of a state farm in latter-day feudalism. As the slave's body is alienated from him, to be used, traded, or destroyed independently of him, his very humanity is being denied. The body I have and am is my most intimate point of entry into the world. It serves me, at times it sustains my flagging spirit with its vitality, at other times it reminds me of my finitude with its limitations. Had I no body, I would not be present at all: Husserl points out that we can imagine even a ghost only as present as a ghostly body.[14] Saint Paul tells us that, even in glory, we shall receive spiritual bodies, while Saint Thomas observes that the so-called natural immortality of the soul would be little to be desired were it not for the promise of the resurrection of the body which breaks the isolation of consciousness and leads it into the world. The respect with which we treat the body left behind by one departed this life reflects a recognition of the intimate union between a person and the body which belonged to him.

In an order of decreasing intensity, we show a similar respect to other things which belonged to the deceased. Though we no longer bury a person's cherished belongings with him, we do not bury his body naked, as it came into the world. For the body is not a monad. All that a person cherishes and cares for through a lifetime becomes its intimate extension. My old coat, the blue glass snail, the hammer which was long my companion, the land I loved, and the beams of the old house that sheltered my children, all that may not be *me*, as Hegel thought it was, just as my body is not simply *me*, yet all of it is intimately mine, my dwelling place, my presence. A person to whom nothing belonged would himself have no way of belonging. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*—the human devoid of properties—is always a fiction and usually a lie, as in the case of the affluent monastic orders which honored their oath of poverty by having their estates owned nominally by the Church, or of the superrich of the "real socialist" societies, who own nothing but enjoy the total domination and exclusive use of a state limousine, apartment, country cottage, and ex-

pense account. For an incarnate being in a finite world, being is indissoluably bound up with having.

Therein, though, lies the rub. It is not simply the problem of the order of time, the senseless accumulation and misuse of possessions, easily perceived as destructive and resolved in the recognition of human role as grateful stewards of God's creation. It is a problem of being as well, the intrinsic contradiction between being, whose justification is love and respect, the posture of a person in a person-al world, and the posture of having which, no matter how lovingly, makes the other mine, using him as a means of my presence, not as an end, whether the other be my body, my land, or the community of humans I call mine.[15]

Here a glimmer of a hard answer emerges slowly, like the cool silver disk of a night light glowing in the forest. It begins with the recognition that two postures which we habitually treat as synonymous with having and with each other, that of possessing and that of belonging, are not only distinct but, in truth, are diametrically opposed. What I would claim to possess can never belong to me—and whatever belongs to me I can never treat as a possession.

It was the land that taught me the difference. When I came to live in the clearing, I could claim a legal possession of the land. The papers had been signed and notarized, the bounds surveyed and staked. It was "my" land. Still, in truth, the land did not belong to me, nor I to the land. It belonged far more tangibly to my long-ago predecessors whose memory lingers in the cellar holes, the paths, the old orchard and currant bushes. It belonged to the occasional fishermen who knew the hidden pools of its river, and the hunters familiar with its deer tracks, even to the deer, the chipmunks, and the porcupines. Though I held the papers in my hand, I was an alien, claiming possession as a conqueror might claim his spoils, but what I so possessed was not yet my own and no legal act could make it so. Only life and love have that power.

Through the long seasons, my relation to the land changed, gradually but fundamentally. As I walked the paths, cleared the brush, pruned the old trees, and pondered over the cellar holes, I came to belong to the land—and the land came to belong to me in turn. It would be wholly misleading to claim, with Locke, that mingling my labor with it, though I did so in prodigious amounts, gave me a claim to possession. The more the land and I belonged to each other, the less did I possess it. The very concept of possessing belongs to a different order. It is a formal claim, not a lived bond. It represents a unidirectional claim to mastery—the "right" to "use or abuse, destroy or alienate"—

rather than the experience of mutual belonging. The claim to possess cannot grow out of a lived experience: it is an abstract, legal claim, a construct established by social convention to order the life of a world of artifacts. It may well be necessary in a crowded, complex society, assigning responsibilities and rights. It may even be legitimate, as a formalization of a lived experience. But the truth, the reality itself, is of a different order, the personal experience of a bond between a person and the land he tills, the worker and the familiar tool which is the companion of his labor, the person and his body. Those are not experiences of possession and domination but of being at ease, at home with each other, of belonging together.

The bond of belonging that grows up over years of life, love, and labor is the most basic truth of being human in a world. Here the claims about the "sacredness of private property," trite and blasphemous when used to justify abstract possession, become meaningful. They reflect not possession but the utterly basic relationship of belonging between a human and his world. It may well be within the prerogatives of the society which established those conventions to modify or disestablish them as it sees fit for the common good. To sever the bond of belonging that love, life, and labor shared have forged between two humans or between a human and the segment of the natural world in which he is incarnate is always a crime and a sacrilege, no less heinous than depriving a person of his body. That is a bond no human imposed and no human may cut asunder. As the land and I came to belong together, I ceased to possess it: I could no longer "alienate" it as if it were a possession, sell it or carve it into subdivisions. The old peasant in Konstantin Rasputin's novel,[16] who knows she must stay with the trees that bore her fruit and the graves of her ancestors on the land about to be flooded by a dam, knew well the sense of belonging. I belong to the land, as it to me—we belong together. When I have left it, as one day I must, it shall belong to those whom I loved and who are prepared to love it. Perhaps it will be the creatures of the forest and the solitary fishermen to whom it belonged before me, perhaps others will come to dwell thereon. Though someone, perhaps the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, shall technically "possess" it, the land will belong to those who belong to it. The land must belong: as belonging, it lives; as possessed, it becomes dead.

The distinction between possessing and belonging is crucial. Though humans may need to formalize having as possessing, the living truth of having is belonging, the bond of love and respect which grows between one being and another in the course of the seasons. The claim

to having is as strong as all the love and care a person gives, and only that strong. It is crucial to have no more than we can love, for without love the claim to having becomes void. Loveless having, possessing in the purest sense, remains illegitimate, a theft. The coat that hangs in the closet, unused and unloved, does indeed belong to the needy person who has none. The point of that ancient adage, however, is not simply the obvious, half-true and half-false one, that the person who claims to possess a coat but never makes it his own by love, care, and use "does not deserve" it, or that the needy somehow deserve it by virtue of their need. Claims of entitlement are beside the point. The basic point, strange-sounding in a world of artifacts, is of a different order—that *things need to be loved,* used, and cared for.[17]

That, I am convinced, is the inmost meaning of having. Humans are justified by the power of their love to bring the world alive, to give things the love, care, and use they need for their fulfillment. Thus they act out the incarnation. That is not a matter of taking possession of the world but of making it our own in a bond of mutual belonging, of taking the world with us from the flow of temporality into eternity. That is the task, at once the privilege and the obligation of humans as beings who dwell at the intersection of time and eternity. In being loved, in becoming *own,* a part of the world acquires an eternal significance. Even an artifact: the countless toy panda bears, mass-produced, mass-distributed, and mass-destroyed as unsold merchandise, disappear in the dark stream of time. The Pandy Bear once loved by a little girl, worn smooth and misshapen by many nights of hugging, stands out of time into eternity. Though in the order of time it will disappear in its turn, as she will herself, in the love she shared with it it will remain, in eternity. The tree cherished as the marvel of tinsel and light becomes eternal in the love, joy, and pain of the humans gathered around it. Not that it will be long remembered—in all likelihood, it will not. Yet though it were forgotten before the twelve days of Christmas are spent, it would still have stood out into eternity in the moment of its glory. So will the land I have loved, as I have loved it. Though it, too, will disappear in the order of time, as I shall in my turn, the love I bore it and the peace we shared in joy and pain stand out into eternity before God. That, finally, is the meaning of incarnation: humans can raise the world of nature to eternity. That is the great power of love, pain, and joy—opening eternity to time.

It is, no less, an awesome responsibility, for humans can also drag the world with which they belong with them to eternal damnation as they close themselves to eternity. The dog who loves his alcoholic master is dragged down with him to destruction; the land, the forest,

the things possessed become depersonalized together with their possessors. That may well be the sense of the dark line of Scripture, that "through man sin came into the world." Humans, in the having in which their lives are inscribed in the temporality of the natural world, take the world with them: as they corrupt and destroy themselves, they can do no less with the world with which they belong. By the same token, humans also have the great power of letting the world they love share in the healing bestowed upon them when eternity intersects the temporality of their lives. It is up to us.

When the silence of dusk replaces the day's speaking, the wonder still remains: we are justified. We are justified in the order of being, together with our kin, the trees, the boulders, the creatures, as bearers of the miracle of the creation: that there is something, not nothing. We are justified in the order of time as we take up the task to which we are called therein, to be faithful stewards of the earth. We are, finally, justified by grace in the order of eternity, as we raise the creation above the passing and perishing of the order of time in an act of love.

Or perhaps not we, specifically, for we fail, too much, too often. It is the idea of humanity, our humanity, that is justified. Thus it is not by rejecting our humanity, but quite the contrary, by reclaiming it, that we find our place in nature.