Is There a Moral Case Against Environmentalism?

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Some time ago in the Washington Post and in the Autumn 1996 issue of City Journal, David Gelernter argued for a moral case against the "tyranny of environmentalism." Gelernter asserted that the Judeo-Christian tradition provides support for moral opposition to environmentalism. Here, we reanalyze the arguments that he used to conclude that there is an anti-environmentalist position with "moral claims that are at least as compelling as the other side's." We show that the Judeo-Christian tradition does not support a position of anti-environmentalism.

Gelernter's argument is based on two key notions. First, that anti-environmentalists "hold to the Judeo-Christian view that man in emphatically not part of nature" (italics in the original). That is, people somehow sit outside or above nature. The second notion is that human beings are not part of nature "protecting and preserving human life is a moral duty that sweeps away all 'duties' to nature, and the very idea of duty to nature."

If the reference to Judeo-Christian tradition were removed, one clearly could challenge wither of these assertions as philosophical starting points. However, we will show here that neither of these notions has support within the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is an interesting and ironic historical twist to Gelernter's claim because he implicitly allies himself with authors such as Lynn White, who take the environmental crisis very seriously (i.e. they do not view it as a farce) and who blame the environmental crisis on

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Contrary to Gelernter's assertion, the brilliance of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the duality in which people are both part of nature and outside of nature. Evidence for the duality begins with the creation story itself: people were created on the same day as all other land animals, not apart from them in time or space. The commandment "to be fruitful and multiply" refers to all of the species of creation, not just humans. Indeed, the creation story is itself concerned with relationships, rather than origins, although most readers tend to miss this. For example, "Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that even the most mute objects, such as dust and water, possess nefesh, soul, and spiritual vitality" (Lamina, N., Faith and Doubt. Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought... New York: Ktav Publishing House. 1986. p. 174). The Shabbat, as a day of rest, is given to animals, just as it is given to humans. Numerous other occurrences in the first five books of the Bible and the Prophets emphasize this human duality, which is one of the essential tensions of the tradition. Through the centuries, Jewish and Christian scholars have affirmed the moral and intellectual tension created because people are simultaneously part of and outside of nature. It may appear that because humans have the additional gift of consciousness, that we are somehow above the flora and fauna or the world. The Judeo-Christian tradition makes it especially clear that even if humans are somehow above other species, it is this additional gift that allows us to make decisions, to have foresight, and to allow us to plan for those that come after us. As humans, we have the extra gift of being able to act in a way that is most beneficial to future generations.

We now turn to the second key notion in Gelernter's argument, that duties to humans supersede all duties to nature. This notion conflicts with the fundamental assertion of the Judeo-Christian tradition that the world belongs to God by virtue of the creation. This means the entire world, not just part of...
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the fragrance of herbs or plants ("Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, who created fragrant plants") or upon seeing creatures of striking beauty ("...who has such beauty in G-d's world"). We say a blessing over the bread, rather than the wheat, in order to acknowledge our part in completing the world. Norman Lamm, referring to the Talmud tractate Shabbat 77b, writes, "The Talmudic and midrashic traditions continue this implicit assumption of man's obligation to, and responsibility for, nature's integrity: Nothing that the Lord creates in the world is superfluous or in vain; hence, all must be sustained." (Lamm, p. 166). Our different status from other organisms does not give us permission to destroy them.

Stewardship plays a key role on the Judeo-Christian tradition, and is misinterpreted by Gelemanter, who describes it as "saving everything." Stewardship is not ownership of, but rather a partnership with nature. Humans are supposed to interact with nature, and care for it as they would other humans. "When the Almighty created Adam, G-d toured with him the Garden of Eden, showing him all of its trees. 'Look how beautiful and perfect my works are,' the Almighty said to Adam. 'I have created everything for you; make sure that you do not spoil and destroy my world; for if you do there is no one to repair the damage." (Midrash Rabbah, Kebelot 7). The mutuality of this relationship becomes especially clear when discussing the emphasis placed upon future generations within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nature's voice has not yet been uncovered; the Judeo-Christian tradition is a voice for nature in which people play a positive moral role. The notion of dominion "was made in the context of men and women 'made in G-d's image' (Genesis 1:26-27) which must involve a strong element of reliability and responsibility," (Lamm, p. 174).

The relationship between humans and nature is one based on equality and responsibility. This does not mean that no changes can ever be made, which is Gelemanter's implicit assertion about environmental protection. The reality is that constant trade-offs occur and decisions will always be difficult. Very often environmentalists are sanctimonious and exhibit the same hubris in personal behavior that they accuse others of in business activity. However, an appeal to a vague assertion that the Judeo-Christian tradition allows one to value income (even if it is a small businessman's whole income, as in Gelemanter's example) above creation is not only incorrect, but specious.

Gelemanter divides the world into environmentalists and anti-environmentalists and notes that anti-environmentalists are desperate in their attempts to elevate all human activity as superior to nature. This debate can be framed, but not in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which asserts that a moral relationship with the creator but no moral relationship with the created self-contradictory. What is needed is a dialogue, not a debate, on how to make sensible trade-offs, while recognizing that the Judeo-Christian tradition squarely supports the protection of creation.