

2003 Conference Report

by John Teske

Star 2003: Ecomorality

*"But when I breathe with the birds,
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,
And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep"
Theodore Roethke*

This year's Star Island conference on Ecomorality included the introduction of a 50th Anniversary addition to existing statements about the purpose of IRAS. The content of this year's conference could not have been a better expression of this "Campion Statement," both in part and as a whole. Therefore, italicized quotations from the Statement will frame my comments on the conference.

We at IRAS take the natural world seriously as a primary source of meaning. Our quest is informed and guided by the deepening and evolving understandings fostered by scientific inquiry.

An ecological understanding of our place in the world provides a ground for formulation of a serious moral view, for a way to take the natural world as a primary source of meaning. Guided by what science knows about our cosmic, geological and ecological contexts, George Fisher's opening talk focused on how we allow our understandings to be isolated from those contexts and therefore ignore the need to live within limits. George's innovative placement of the epic of evolution on the scale of a trip across the United States not only made it easy to understand but emphasized the sensitivity to place that is so important, particularly in getting a feel for the cyclicity of natural processes. One had to love the emergence of tool use as we reach Appledore, of Cro Magnon man at the sundial, of all modernity within the lecture hall. The balance of individuality and reciprocity lies at the center of the cycle of the mutually dependent, integrated communities that are ecosystems. Other creatures and the rest of life are in an important sense our friends; our personal involvements play a role in the construction and destruction of life. Thus our task is one of reconnection, reconciliation and reconsecration, even at the cost of changing who we are. George's talk was a wonderful example of scientific understanding expressed in the hopeful categories of religious imagination.

John Grim's talk on relational knowing in indigenous communities brought our attention to particular rituals and practices that connect people to the powers of the land, from dream places and medicine bundles to the sincerity of connection reflected in sharing a pipe or purification in a sweat lodge. Indigenous ethical systems are embedded in particularities of place and the relationships of people to these places, not as animistic projections but through the establishment of relationships with "presence." Like systems of social relations, kinship and responsibility, health itself may be tied to embeddedness in landscapes, not by owning the land but by establishing and marking relationships with it, thus making tradition and ancestry present. John's contribution was not so much guided by science as a guide for the attention of science. His talks always take the form of entertaining and amusing stories that embody the subject matter, the lives of people in local situations and places, rather than objectifying them. Even if the more local wisdom he presents requires work to be extended into broader communities or wider economic and ecological systems, he catches us off-guard and renders us more attentive. So to John, "Hey Ho!" - and let us share that smoke!

Mike Kalton's talk took the form of a sermon, with Robinson Jeffers' poem "Rock and Hawk" as his text. Here the attention was to place as indifferent to us, as deeper than the species, the life, even the religions, that have come and gone, culminating in a deep mystical sense of home even in stone. While some of Mike's parishioners were dissatisfied with his use of science and the connectedness of his discourse, most found his images, aphorisms and the description of his emotional struggles evocative, powerful and lucid - and awarded him a standing ovation to show it.

These placements and contextualizations served to locate and embed us in the world. But I was moved to another level by Barb Smuts's talk on animal and human emotions and our moral obligations to nonhuman

"persons," Stephanie Preston's presentation on our emotion-processing skills with their rooting in the mother-infant bond, and Stacey Ake's workshop on nature as other and as self, which clarified distinctions between sympathy and empathy. They helped us discover scientific and philosophical grounds, and our empathic capacities, for a nature-based morality. Barb's masterful description of some of those same capacities, and of true intersubjectivity and individuality, in baboons and other creatures provided the science that informed and guided me toward a deeper understanding of a moral link to the natural world, a true ecomorality. Moved by the level of nonverbal attention, openness and even meditative practice that allowed her to conduct her investigations, I found myself noticing the "bird people" outside a window after her talk. Nevertheless, there are human limits and other kinds of ecological relations, as Barb later made clear on the deck after sunset. Asked how she treated the "mosquito people," she replied, "I kill them."

It took contributions from several religious traditions in the latter part of the conference, and from co-chair Brian Swimme's chapel talk remarks on nature as subject rather than object, to move me to a final level of insight. That is the importance and profound spirituality of identifying our very selves with the world of nature of which they are a part, of experiencing the world of nature not as our possession, not merely our place, but in a fundamental and deep sense as us, our very subjectivity. As Francis of Assisi said, "What you are looking for is what is looking." But I am jumping the gun.

From here, our quests for meaning take us in divergent directions. For some, the natural world and its emergent manifestations in human experience and creativity are the focus of exploration.

Granting a common sense of place, the talks by Ursula Goodenough and Terry Deacon focused on the exploration of the natural world and its emergent manifestations. I was not disappointed in my expectation that these presentations would be intellectually meaty, and that these two would deliver a one-two punch (although, in the view of one attendee, more like a set-up and a knock-down). Ursula's talk, "Emergentism as a Way of Thinking about Evolution and Ecosystems," introduced Terry's three orders of emergence, suggesting that ecomorality follows as an imperative from our scientific understanding of nature. Emergence is defined as the generation of new properties as a consequence of relationships between existing materials. The Darwinian twist involves the process of natural selection, operating directly on "third order" emergents (first and second order emergents encoded as replicable traits). Since occasionally novel emergent properties can be replicated and selected, traits can beget traits, producing the creative flourishing of evolution. The "nothings but" beget the "somethings more" of cellular awareness, neural awareness, brain-based awareness, sensory integration, learning and memory that ultimately produce symbolic minds, enabling the construction of symbolic cultural niches by human beings as naturally as dams by beavers. This non-mystical, fully relational, natural emergence is what Ursula refers to as the "cultural twist," and its explication provides us with the beginnings of an account of how consciousness can feel "immaterial" and still be fully connected to the particulars of human biology.

The moral lesson lies in the emergent modes of human experience, heavily dependent on a neocortex that has rearranged the running of an ancient mammalian engine whose emotional, social and even sexual configuration has not been left unaltered. This allows nurturance to extend to the development of friendship and trust, empathy to compassion and the "nothing but" of strategic reciprocity to justice and fairness. Finally, the story of emergence itself, including the human interconnectedness that is illustrated by it, allows us to see our deep connections with the whole tree of life. As a commitment over a lifetime to what we consider to be good, that which allows humans to flourish in community, morality has everything to do with ecology, our knowledge of which vastly expands our concept of community - and hence our understanding of what is good. Ursula's steeping in science sometimes gives short shrift to philosophical and metaphysical, as opposed to causal, questions that have no empirical answers. Still, she made spirited points about how, to paraphrase James Park Morton, "Ecology is how to do Morality."

Terry Deacon's talk on "Emergence and Ecomorality" argued that it is an emergent capacity for moral regard, rooted in symbolically mediated intersubjective experience, that makes the very ideas of good and evil possible. He acknowledged that while ought cannot be reduced to is, the capacity to develop and experience oughts emerged from is. "Moral regard" can occur only after the development of evolved pro-social emotional systems, irrespective of the naturalistic fallacy. He argued that the critical emergence for these purposes lies in intersubjectivity, trans-subjective identification and symbolically mediated empathy, without which our

morality might be merely one of benevolent Golems. Terry's sophisticated notion of emergence counters the essentialist fallacy of looking for functions in things rather than in their relations to each other, thereby explaining the "something else" that comes from "nothing more." I found Terry's account remarkably clear and illuminating, among other things in its use of metaphors like compound interest. It is only within this account that we can understand the evolutionary construction of "aboutness," the kind of representations that stand as proxies and out of which semiotic relationships can be constructed.

A serious theory of emergence provides a bridge to account for the kind of symbolic system that Terry subsequently posits as necessary for understanding conceptual life, conceptual blending and the affective components that make empathy and moral regard possible. Terry's rapid, deep and lengthy presentation overwhelmed much of the audience. In fairness, however, I believe that those of us familiar with his previous Star presentations were well equipped to follow his rehearsal of semiotic development from iconic to indexical to symbolic systems and the "experiential reorganization by proxy" that symbolic systems allow. Indeed, a psychologist familiar with the work of, say, Fauconnier and Turner on conceptual blending might find Terry's proposals not to be deeply original. But it is emergent emotion that is central to Terry's account of the development of human moral regard. This is because emergent experiences produced by juxtaposed but competing emotional states are synergistic with - both informing and informed by - our symbolic capacities. These interactions are not the kind of non-adaptive spandrels that evolutionary psychology tends to see in religion and ethics, but rather central aspects of human experience.

Memory, anticipation and action with regard to the emotional experience of an other constitute the central dynamic behind the development of moral regard. This includes the blending of self with other that is rooted in the mimesis and empathy made possible by symbolic simulation. Via story, myth and history our symbolic capacities can either inhibit or amplify the world of our interiors, our virtual realities of mind and culture, dampening attention to immediate experience but shaping the actual lived experiences. Those capacities enable our imagination of another's experience, both to do her good and to impose suffering. One is tempted to say "unimaginable suffering," but unfortunately it is precisely our imagination that makes it possible to inflict untold horror. Our capacities for intersubjectivity are thus deeply ambiguous; they can produce as much evil as good. The hope, of course, is that the biases in the compounding processes will lead us to identify ourselves better and better with what is other, thereby giving rise to both a natural and a moral vector.

For some, understandings of the natural world are interwoven with understandings inherent in various religious traditions, generating additional paths of exploration and encounter. As a result, we articulate our emerging orientations with many voices, voices that are harmonious in that we share a common sense of place and gratitude.

Three speakers powerfully mined differing traditions for insights relevant to environmental ethics and consistent with the presentations of the more naturalistically oriented speakers. Paul Woodruff's unpacking of Creon's failings in *Antigone* drew attention to a deeply rooted Western reverence for the natural order.

Brian Brown's diamond elucidation of the similarities and contrasts in the cosmologies embedded in differing Buddhist traditions elicited delighted admiration from a religious studies professor. Describing a vision of a self-expressive reality that puts forth a material as much as a spiritual claim, he found that vision's roots not only in later traditions but in the foundational Buddhist principle of "co-dependent origination." He then described a Buddhist approach to environmental ethics grounded in an ontology where nothing exists outside a context of relations, and traced the development of such concepts through the "wondrous being" of Mahayana Buddhism. In that connection he used the complimentary concepts of embryonic and absolute consciousness to describe the movement of the universe towards its own self-revelation, at least in part in the human mind. Brian concluded by addressing the Buddhist view that a mindful awareness of relationality brings us to fuller existence through reflection on and care for life in its entirety.

Emphasizing similar ideas, David Haberman drew attention to the relationships between the Deep Ecology of Arne Naess and the concept of the interconnected self found in Vedantic texts and Gandhi's writings.

We acknowledge as well a shared set of values and concerns pertaining to peace, justice, dignity, cultural and ecological diversity and planetary sustainability. Although we may differ and hence debate on how these concerns are best addressed, we are committed to participating in their resolution.

The early afternoon workshop sessions, supported by the family and friends of Bud Fisher, presented a compendium of specific environmental issues and approaches to their solution. These included energy and climate, habitat and species, agriculture and forestation, and population and consumption, concluding with a session on voluntary simplicity.

Co-chair Mary Evelyn Tucker brought the conference to an end with a presentation on the Earth Charter, which not only was prepared with notable grass roots input but embraces the epic of evolution as its basic cosmology. Balancing concerns for economic justice and sustainability, the Charter recognizes how critical it is to view the Earth as the irrevocable home of our living community. To me this vibrant expression of a planetary ecomorality provided one of the best possible ways to conclude the conference.

I was blown away by this conference. It exceeded my expectations, drawing on a wider range of resources and a more diverse audience than standard IRAS fare (which I have always thought more than impressive). The children's program, as always, was well beyond anything of its kind that I have seen elsewhere. The spiritual centering of the chapel talks, the nightly candlelight rituals, the camaraderie fostered by joint meals and the hubbub of the deck, the amazing variety of music and song, the brilliant use of Bob Schaible to give poetic introductions to the talks (one of my favorite souvenirs is the booklet he printed up containing all of these in one place), the community-produced daily Beacon: all are part of a full, living human experience that goes well beyond the intellectual content of one of the best interdisciplinary conferences I attend.

Because of a lack of space in a conference full to the gills, I ended up sharing a triple room - and one is always wary of who he might get "stuck with." Well, I got James Miller, a religious studies scholar from Canada who gave a wonderful workshop on Daoism, and Larry Rasmussen, a brilliant ethicist from New York. I can only hope they felt as privileged to be in my company as I did in theirs. One cannot, of course, say enough about the joy of seeing and spending extended time with old friends, chatting over meals or the happy hour, endlessly on the deck... and the opportunity to make incredible new ones. Bathed in the natural beauty of this place, the wide sea and sky, the beat of the surf on the cliffs, the cry of the gulls, the smell of the salt air, it's easy to understand a concept like wondrous being. And after coming to IRAS at Star for more than ten years, I found for the first time that I could really "get down." At how many conferences could you dance to blues like "Nature Talking" into the wee hours, like no one is watching, with the principal conference organizer, the indomitable and untiring Ursula Goodenough? Sheer joy.

I will come back.