

## A NATURALIST LOOKS AT SIN AND REDEMPTION

[ The plea for harmlessness which the American naturalist **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch** makes is in line with the best thought in India, ancient and modern. The Buddha put succinctly the thesis here presented, some 2500 years ago. In the "Canto of Flowers" in the *Dhammapada* we read: "Just as a bee, having collected honey, flies away, in no wise injuring the colour or the fragrance of the flower, so let a Muni ( Sage ) dwell in his village. "

This essay throws new light upon the cryptic saying in the *Book of Job*: "For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field; and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee." Right use but not abuse of Nature's bounty must be the way to harmony and sympathy between man and his younger brothers in the lower kingdoms. The abjuring of cruelty in our dealings with them, ending the blood-sports which rightly our author strongly condemns, would not only betoken greater reverence for life, it would also be a step towards greater justice and mercy towards our fellow-men.—ED. ]

The sense of sin, or the feeling of inherent guilt in living, has troubled many of the most devout and pious of men. The Hebrew theologians invented a myth to explain the origin of sin, but to the student of Nature it seems sufficiently obvious without any myth. It is simply that no creature can exist without doing harm to other living creatures. This is the essence of sin, and so long as we continue to live we cannot escape it.

Daily we destroy living beings to serve as the food without which we must perish. We do least evil in this direction when we eat fruits, which are made to be eaten; they are the plant's enticement or reward to those who disseminate its seeds, and fail of their purpose unless they are eaten. But even if we could limit our diet strictly to fruits, the

world is so full of hungry mouths that in eating fruits we deprive other creatures that need them, thereby doing harm to living beings—which is sin. And when we kill to eat, our sin is so much the greater.

Not only in filling our insatiable stomachs do we sin. The warmer parts of the earth so teem with life that we can hardly take a step without crushing or maiming the ant and the worm—the devout of certain religious sects of India always carry a broom and sweep the way before themselves, to avoid trampling the humble beings that swarm in the dust. The lamp by whose light I write attracts many a small winged being that foolishly quenches its tiny life in the flame. The land that I occupy, the fields that I sow, were taken away from wild creatures that as prior occupants had a better right



to them. And, since competition is always keenest between the members of the same species, each of us occupies a place in the world that but for us would be taken by some other man, who might well make better use of it than ourselves.

In the sense in which we now use the term, even plants are sinners. Hardly one of them attains any considerable stature without crowding out, overshadowing and starving for light or water other seedlings which had started hopefully to grow up beside it, and might have displayed their blossoms in the sunlight if the ruthless competitor had been absent. Each larger tree must count by hundreds or thousands the poor victims of its spreading boughs, which have deprived them of the light that is the life of green things. Perhaps the only plants which exist without sin are those of extreme hardihood which grow high up in the mountains on the edge of the eternal snows, where nothing else can survive. Yet even here it is likely that a number of seeds fell into the same crevice in the rock, where there was room for only one or two to reach their full development; and the harder ones crowded out their weaker neighbours.

Thus neither we nor any other creature can exist without daily and hourly committing the kind of sins that all our best moral teachings and all our laws are directed against—injury to our neighbours, which in the larger sense are all other living

things. This is the original and ineluctable sin. Is there no redemption from it?

To a naturalist, it seems that the only redemption from the sin inherent in living is through becoming something more noble, more worthy to exist, than those other beings which we must deprive of life in order to continue to live ourselves. Unfortunately we have only our own human and fallible standards of what is worthy and noble; yet we must make use of the best we have, with the faith that these standards spring from the depths of Life itself.

Consider a great tree with massive trunk and wide-spreading boughs, which imparts majesty to the whole landscape, seeming to gladden the earth with its presence; which offers a grateful shade for men and beasts and birds, and safe concealment for their nests amidst its foliage; which at the due season brightens all the surrounding area with its blossoms, and later satisfies many a hungry mouth with the largess of its fruitage; whose massive limbs provide firm support for many a graceful fern and many a bright-flowered orchid plant. We know that as it grew up and spread out its branches the great tree unavoidably overshadowed and suppressed neighbouring saplings and plants of other kinds, yet we feel that, in being the kind of tree it is, it has in large measure expiated the crimes inherent in its manner of growth and development.



Consider a bird brilliant in plumage and melodious in song, that delights the eye and soothes the ear, that brings life and joyous movement into the the woodland which without it would be solitary and gloomy. We know that to sustain life the bird must each day devour a great number of hapless insects and other small creatures ; yet we feel that the bird is so much more beautiful, so much nobler than its victims, that by being such a bird it redeems itself of the sins which it must continue to commit so long as it lives.

Men, with their extensive and varied requirements of food, raiment, housing, transportation and entertainment, must come into competition with a great variety of other living beings as well as with each other. The most considerate and the gentlest of them can hardly avoid being great sinners against their fellow creatures. Even the hermit in his lonely cell can scarcely live free of sin. We cannot hope to become majestic in stature and fruitful like a tree, or so beautiful and songful as a bird. To redeem ourselves from sin we must strive first for intellectual and moral nobility, " to become beautiful in the inner man," as Socrates expressed it. We must pass through life diffusing good-will and kindness to all creatures rather than hate and destruction. So in a measure we can compensate for the evils inseparable from our mode of life: The redeemed soul of man is as a beacon of truth and gentleness and intellectual

light amidst the rude unheeding forces of the universe.

From a more material aspect, there is much that we can do to mitigate the injustices we must commit against other living creatures in order to survive ourselves. If we would eat, we can hardly avoid clearing the land, destroying the original vegetation, and driving out, for eventual destruction, the animals that long dwelt upon this land. We can in part expiate this sin against Nature by so treating our land that we conserve and even augment its fertility, so that it may support more living beings than previously ; but if we abuse and wear out good soil, our sin is unmitigated and beyond redemption.

We need lumber for our dwellings and public edifices and sin against the forest to obtain it. If we ruin and destroy the forest in our lumbering operations our crime is past all pardon ; but if we cut with moderation and good judgment, so that the woodland may continue to produce timber and perhaps even produce it at a rate greater than in its natural state, we atone for our sin against Nature.

Where we set our houses we make a little desert of an area where formerly wild creatures dwelt happily ; but we can compensate for our misdeed by surrounding our dwellings with trees and shrubbery that provide food and shelter for the birds. Although we cannot live without committing misdeeds, we



can do much to compensate for them and to relieve ourselves of their oppressive weight.

To participate in any sport or amusement which inevitably causes pain and suffering is a sin for which I see no redemption. A recent report estimates that during the past hunting season in the United States of America five million water-fowl were left crippled—in addition to about four times that number killed. Is it not pathetic to know that in a country which enjoys greater resources of food, and amusements more extensive and varied than any other people has ever known, multitudes of men spend their leisure in a way that causes so stupendous a total of misery and suffering? One wonders that the hunter can enjoy his supper and his sleep for thinking of the creatures which must pass through many days of agony to pay for his few hours of rough pleasure. The truth is that he does not think. No thoroughly cultured man has ever hunted for sport. Many whom the world accounts wise and good have been hunters, but there have been great deficiencies in their education and tremendous blind areas in their spiritual horizon.

To live justly calls for cultivation of both the head and the heart—for exact knowledge as well as right feeling. To manage our agricultural lands, our forests and our waters so that they will yield us the things indispensable for life, without becoming impoverished, requires a vast

amount of scientific investigation. To deal fairly with our non-human neighbours we must understand their habits and their feelings a great deal better than we do, and such understanding can be won only through patient observation and clear thinking.

But it is not enough to pile up scientific data. We need at the same time to train ourselves and our children in just and wholesome attitudes. We must have high ideals and liberality of spirit and the wisdom to value things of the spirit above material wealth. Without the correct attitude, increase in scientific knowledge may increase rather than diminish our sin—as in our own times we have seen happen on a tremendous scale. Although our need for more extensive and exact scientific information in many fields is great, our present need for cultivation of the spirit is far more pressing.

The doctrine which we here expound is, like so many others, capable of being "twisted by rogues to make a trap for fools." Let no man set forth on a career of aggrandizement, of exploitation of his neighbours or ruthless destruction of Nature, in the delusion that he is making of himself something so great and noble, or so useful to his fellow-men, that he thereby redeems himself from the sins he is committing on so vast a scale. The probability is that such a man, far from having a noble, generous and lovable spirit, is of a mean and selfish character

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which, if successful in his sordid schemes, he will attempt to conceal beneath spectacular acts of charity. as we can, we shall find it sufficiently difficult to balance our accounts with Life.

Living as humbly and unobtrusively

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

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