

Our Difficult Choice

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Illustrated by Fred Collins

THE attractions that draw us to the living world of animals and plants are subtle and difficult to analyze. If we have the good fortune to come, in early childhood, into close contact with living things of varied kinds, we are often bound to them by a sort of instinctive sympathy that joins life to life. We are already strongly attached to the natural world before we are prepared to ask ourselves just what are the ties that bind us to it. Then we may discover that we are attracted to living things by their beauty, by the fascination of learning their ways, by the tranquility we often find in close association with them. Beyond all this there is that pervasive sympathy that unites us with them simply because we share that mysterious thing called life. Many of us come to love the living world with a deep, intense, unselfish love.

That which we love we seek to join to ourselves by manifold ties. The more numerous and the more massive these bonds, the more we feel that the loved object is truly ours. The chief of these ties are sympathy, harmonious association, and knowledge. Sympathy, which is spontaneous and instinctive, is, of these three, the most difficult to cultivate by purposeful endeavor. Like inspiration, it may come to us unsought, or we may vainly strive to kindle it. Harmonious association and knowledge are, on the contrary, capable of deliberate cultivation. The former is what we mean by goodness; for we commonly call "good" the person or thing that enters into harmonious relations with

In this article Dr. Skutch, noted naturalist, presents an outstandingly thought-provoking discussion of a basic question of moral values. We would be much interested in reader comment on the points that he makes in this article.

ourselves, satisfying some vital need or helping us to attain some cherished goal. "Bad" we apply to that which injures, thwarts, or conflicts with ourselves. The whole purpose of ethics is to make our striving for goodness of this sort steady, rational, and impersonal, rather than capricious and self-

centered. Insofar as we love the living world we endeavor to enter into harmonious association with it, to lead our lives and fulfill our aspirations with the least possible interference with other living things—in short, to cultivate an ethical relationship with Nature. The more we succeed in doing this, the more we feel at one with it.

Knowledge also binds us to its object. Much of man's knowledge of Nature has been acquired for purely utilitarian ends, for the purpose of satisfying our basic needs more adequately and easily, and even of multiplying needless luxuries. But over and above this economic motive for learning about Nature, there is a more spiritual motive, which doubtless always existed and grows stronger every year. It is not only, as Aristotle said, that men love knowledge for its own sake. We also love knowledge for the feeling of intimacy with the thing about which we know, for the bond it creates between this object and ourselves. We may, for example, be attracted to a bird by its beauty, or its blithesome song. But it flashes across our delighted vision, its mellow notes die away, and we have lost all immediate contact with it. If we discover how it builds its nest, how it rears its young, or where it

passes the cold winter months, we seem to have established other ties with it, to have acquired a firmer grasp on it. Thus love leads to the desire for knowledge, and knowledge binds more firmly the bonds that love would forge.

In these ways love of living things leads us to cultivate two of the most precious and honored of human ideals, moral goodness and knowledge. We wish to live in harmony with them and we wish to know about them, to understand their mode of life. In many other fields, men cultivate simultaneously the ideals of knowledge and goodness without finding any conflict between them; but those of us who aspire to both of these goals with reference to the living world soon come face to face with a baffling dilemma.

The sensitive student of life is involved in a tragic contradiction that rarely troubles those who pursue other branches of knowledge. The astronomer learns about the heavenly bodies without the least interference with them; he could not break them up for analysis if he would. The physicist investigates the behavior of matter in masses or minute particles without feeling that he is destroying that which he is powerless to create. The chemist knows no twinge of conscience as he dissolves salts or minerals to learn their composition. The geologist who tears apart the strata of the earth to uncover the fossils that lurk within destroys unique structures, but at most he barely scratches the earth's broad face. But the biologist who kills living things to discover certain facts about them, who mutilates them or even upsets their normal way of life to learn other facts, sacrifices the ideal of perfect goodness for the sake of knowledge. If he is morally sensitive as well is inquisitive, he can not fail to feel the conflicts involved in his researches.

I wish it were possible to bring every boy and girl who enters a course in zoology or general biology to a full realization of what lies before him. Perhaps his love of animals, or spontaneous sympathy with them, has engendered the wish to know more about them, and he has taken the most obvious mode of satisfying this desire. Doubtless to cut open a living earthworm, even to dissect an anesthetized frog, does not seem a heartless or a wicked thing to do, and does not clash with the affection for dogs or horses, for furry creatures or for birds, which led him into this study. If he goes on to more advanced courses and is set to dissect warm-blooded animals for which he feels greater sympathy, his aversion toward the occupation may become more intense. But by easy steps we are led to perform with hardly a qualm that which we at first never imagined ourselves capable of doing. Almost before he is aware of the changes that have occurred within

him, the lad who delighted in living birds, and staunchly opposed the destruction of their nests, has become a professional ornithologist, taking thousands of feathered lives in the name of science. Or the youth who hesitated to cut into an anesthetized frog is performing on living dogs and monkeys, experiments that make us shudder. And these men to whom the killing and mutilation of living creatures is a daily occupation, are no longer free to consider with calm detachment the full implications of their conduct. Their daily bread, the welfare of wife and children, depend upon the continuance of these activities. Their moral judgment has been so strained by their economic needs that it is no longer of much value.

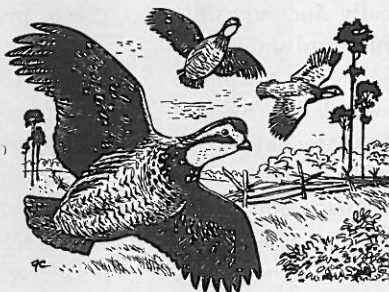
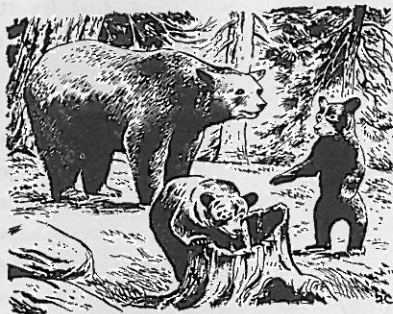
It is a pity that the great teachers to whom large sections of humanity look for guidance failed to consider this conflict between goodness and knowledge, which indeed had hardly become a problem in their

day. It is likewise regrettable that more recent philosophers and moralists, who have written at such great length on a wide range of ethical questions, have not given this matter the attention it demands. But it is not hard to imagine how some of the revered prophets and sages of old would have treated the question. I have little doubt how Mahavira, the lawgiver of the Jains, and Gautama the Buddha would have answered us. When they forbade their followers to take life they were not thinking, as in the Mosaic code, merely of men of one's own nation, but of all animate creatures. It is highly improbable that they would have made exceptions to their rule when it was pointed out to them that it is sometimes necessary to take life in order to learn how animals are constructed and how they function. They would have told us roundly that the first thing it behooves us to know is ourselves, which we begin to do when we free our minds from all blinding passions and gaze steadily upon our origin and our destiny. They might have gone on to point

out that once we understand ourselves we shall also know as much as is necessary about other creatures, for all living beings are fundamentally the same. Laotse, the Taoist sage who said that the best of men is like water, that benefits all things and does not strive with them, would, I fancy, have returned

much the same answer.

I find it more difficult to imagine how Jesus would have treated the problem. Apparently He believed that the world order, as known to us, was fast approaching its end; and it would have been consistent with this view to hold that knowledge of natural processes is no more necessary for gaining the kingdom of heaven than the possession of worldly goods. Unfortunately, the whole subsequent attitude of the



Western world to this matter was determined not so much by Jesus as by St. Paul, a man as able as his sympathies were narrow. Since he questioned whether God could care about an ox (I Corinth. 9:9-10), he undoubtedly would have maintained that men need have no compunction in gathering whatever knowledge they find useful or agreeable, without pausing to consider how their researches might hurt non-human creatures. For the whole "brute" creation of the Western world, the Pauline view has had tragic consequences.

Since we search in vain through the pronouncements of mankind's most respected teachers

for an adequate consideration of the conflict between the ideals of goodness and knowledge that confronts those of us who associate most intimately with the living world, I suppose that each of us must ponder the problem for himself and take his own stand. After years of questioning, I have taken mine. But my purpose at the present time is not to offer an answer to the dilemma, to pound or defend any special view. To do so in a somewhat convincing fashion would entail a discussion of ultimate questions for which space is lacking here. I wish merely to set you to thinking clearly and bravely about this matter, and getting your children to think about it as early as they can. Too long have those of us who call ourselves friends of Nature refused to look squarely at the implications of our position; too long have we slurred over the contradictions involved in it, or hastily accepted conventional compromises, which, when examined, are found to rest upon the flimsiest of foundations.

I should be sorry to create the impression that I see an irreconcilable opposition between the goal of perfect goodness and that of complete knowledge—between the ideals of religion and of science when carried to their ultimate logical conclusions. To find these highest and noblest of human aspirations radically incompatible might cause us to lose faith in the unity and soundness of our nature. On the contrary, I hold that the more adequate our knowledge, the more completely we can realize our ideal of goodness, and the greater our goodness the more perfect our understanding becomes. It is not knowledge itself, but the means that beings with our peculiar limitations in sensory and mental equipment are often driven to employ in the pursuit of knowledge, that so often causes us to violate our ideal of goodness as applied to the living world. It is quite conceivable that beings with more penetrating minds and an ampler endowment of senses than ours should learn all that we aspire to know without harming any living thing.

Too often we take the shortest and easiest way when a more painstaking method would yield not only the information that we desire but bring us fuller understanding in the end, all without injuring the creatures

we investigate. In studying the nesting habits of certain species of birds in which the sexes can not be distinguished by appearance or voice, I have sometimes wished to learn which member of a pair was the male and which the female. Two ways were open to me—to shoot one of the birds and perform an autopsy, or to see which of the two laid an egg. The first method would have given me the desired information in a few minutes; the second required many hours of careful watching, but by it I discovered things that I could not have learned from a lifeless corpse. In investigating the resistance of animals to climatic extremes,

we can, if we have the necessary expensive equipment, confine them in freezing chambers or heated compartments until they die, or we can observe how different climates and extremes of weather affect them in their free state. The first method is quicker and easier, but the second may yield the fuller knowledge. We can base our anatomy, and the classification

that rests upon it, on the study of animals deliberately killed for this purpose, or limit our researches to those which die by means beyond our control, as the human anatomist must. Again the first is far quicker, but the second more satisfying to the spirit, and perhaps there is no great urgency in this matter. Facts of anatomy and physiology, which today it seems impossible for us to discover without killing or maiming animate creatures, tomorrow, with improved apparatus and methods, will be learned from living animals without causing them any harm. Many researches for which biologists are willing to torture or to sacrifice great numbers of animals are directed to questions of doubtful importance.

Since, once we pass beyond the narrow sphere of human society, our conventional religions and philosophies fail to provide guidance, each of us must decide for himself whether goodness or knowledge is to be given precedence, whether it is more important to cultivate harmonious relations with living things, or merely to know about them. In reaching a decision on this pressing problem we shall be influenced by considerations of the most diverse kinds, but two seem to merit particular attention. The first is that of completeness, of the possibility of reaching the goal we set for ourselves. We must admit at the outset that neither perfect goodness nor complete knowledge is, for beings such as we, an attainable ideal, but at best a limit toward which we can advance by an endless progression. Since we can not eat without destroying some living thing, can hardly take a step in the open fields without crushing some minute creature, it is obvious that so long as we live and move we can not attain that ideal of goodness which consists in cultivating harmony with all things. Although in past ages the savant could make all recorded knowledge his province, in modern times the growth of the (Continued on page 215)



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sciences has been so rapid that the most capacious intellect can hardly encompass a single one of them; yet all of mankind's actual knowledge accounts for but a small fraction of what might be known. In comparison with the number of facts we should need to acquire in order to possess complete knowledge, even of our solar system, the number of our daily contacts with other beings is small. By taking thought to make these contacts more harmonious and mutually profitable, perhaps also by reducing their number through simplifying our lives, we can draw ever nearer to our ideal of goodness. Although neither complete knowledge nor perfect goodness is attainable by us, we can come far closer to the latter than to the former; and it seems wise to strive toward that goal which we can most nearly reach.

The second consideration is that of intimacy, of whether knowledge or goodness is more central to ourselves, less likely to be lost once it has been won. At this point it may be profitable to recall that we *have* knowledge but we *are* good. In becoming good we improve ourselves, in learning facts we amass possessions that may be lost by forgetting. Our gains seem more secure when we refine and ennoble our own nature by living in concord with the things around us than when we merely learn about them. This harmonious association binds us to the living world more firmly than knowledge can, and more completely satisfies that love of living things which led us to consider this perplexing problem.
