

Love for Our Earth

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH



SINCE the beginning of the present century, there has been a growing popular awareness of man's dependence upon the earth. Although city-dwellers tend to lose sight of this, no one who gives serious thought to his condition as an animal who needs many things to preserve life can fail to recognize his utter dependence upon the earth that supports him. And dwellers, long established upon a limited area of ancestral land, have often been awakened to the vital necessity of caring for it lest it become exhausted. But the peculiar conditions of Western civilization had for many centuries encouraged a careless attitude.

When, after much restless wandering, the Barbarians who overthrew the Roman Empire finally settled down in their conquered realms, they found them greatly depopulated, and apparently there was no shortage of arable fields. Throughout the Middle Ages, wars and plagues kept the population low; and in many parts of Europe great tracts of forest remained as a reserve for future use. Then the Era of Discovery disclosed to the European nations vast continents thinly inhabited by tribes who could oppose no serious resistance to men equipped with firearms, so that their lands were available for colonization by the discoverers. Soon they were able to ship great quantities of food and raw materials to the growing multitudes of the mother countries.

In such circumstances there grew up the attitude that the world had un-

limited resources awaiting the greedy hand of the exploiter. It seemed to thoughtless men that, although the earth as a whole was doubtless indispensable to mankind, if any particular part of it became exhausted another might be found to supply what it no longer yielded. Only within the present century has there developed (thanks to teaching and a swelling flood of propaganda) the widespread realization that this is a false and dangerous attitude, and that every part of the earth is essential to the welfare of mankind.

While from one viewpoint the earth has of late been growing more important in the eyes of its inhabitants, from another it has for a long while been shrinking in stature. To the majority of the ancients, this earth was the center of the Universe, and about it revolved the moon, the sun, the planets, and the vault of the fixed stars. Some of the leading thinkers of ancient Greece considered the world to be eternal; and the widespread enthusiastic admiration for the beauty of the cosmos and the regularity of its movements is one of the most pleasing features of Classical thought. But the earth was gradually dethroned from its central position.

By the fifth century B. C., the Pythagoreans were teaching that the terrestrial sphere, along with an unseen counter-earth and all the visible heavenly bodies, revolved about a great fire that occupied the honorable station at the center of the cosmos. About the same time, Democritus and the Atomists advanced the view that the world we know is one of many similar creations, formed by the fortuitous concourse of

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the restless atoms. In the third century B. C., the Greek astronomer Aristarchus of Samos anticipated Copernicus in explaining astronomical phenomena by the circulation of the earth and other planets about a central sun. But his contemporaries and successors were not prepared to receive this revolutionary theory. The complicated system of Ptolemy held sway for many centuries; until at last, in early modern times, the evidence opposed to it grew overwhelmingly strong, and against powerful ecclesiastical opposition the view that the earth circulates about the sun won acceptance by all unprejudiced minds.

But not only was the earth forced to yield its central position to the sun, this luminary itself has also been steadily humbled as astronomers turned ever more powerful telescopes upon the starry heavens. We are now told that our sun is one among some hundred billion stars in the Milky Way system, and by no means the largest and brightest of them, nor one distinguished by its occupation of a central position. And the Galaxy itself is one among many similar groups of stars, scattered through space so extensive that the very unit employed to measure it, the distance traversed by a ray of light in the course of a year, utterly confounds our imagination. What has become of our once-proud earth in this new cosmic perspective? It is one of the smaller satellites of one of the smaller stars in one among many stellar systems. Viewed against the background of the known Universe, it seems hardly more than an ephemeral speck of dust, a thing almost pitiful in its insignificance.

Confused Values

Thus recent trends of thought, especially in astronomy and conservation, lead us to take this attitude toward our planet: In itself, as a member of the cosmos, it is almost negligible; yet to its inhabitants it has an importance impossible to exaggerate, so that we are warned of the direst consequences if we underestimate it and fail to treat it with due consideration.

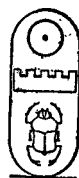
A thing which is important in itself we call an *end*; but that which is of consequence only in so far as it serves or leads to something else is a *means*.

It is an ethical doctrine that ends must always be treated with respect and should never be exploited for the sake of some other being. Means, on the contrary, may be utilized as we see fit. Our single consideration is to derive the greatest possible benefit from them; and when their usefulness is exhausted they are thrown on the dust heap. If the earth is merely a means to human welfare, it deserves to be treated like any tool or piece of machinery which we make to serve our needs. But there is a difference. Since we do not know how the earth could be replaced if it wore out, we should be careful to make it last indefinitely.

That the earth deserves to be treated like some extraordinarily big and complicated machine made to serve human purposes, and that its chief claim to special consideration is that unlike our machines it cannot be replaced when worn out, seems to be a sound deduction from premises the validity of which is widely admitted by the present generation. Yet when we gaze upon the earth with its broad plains and noble hills, its stately forests and smiling meadows, its hurrying streams and heaving seas, a voice deep within us whispers that somehow we have made a mistake.

All our finer sentiments revolt at the notion of treating this beautiful planet, which for millions of years has been mellowing in the sunshine and covering its broad surface with an ever greater profusion of lovely and graceful living forms, merely as an instrument to serve the material needs of mankind. Hence we are prompted to review the argument which led us to this conclusion and see if we cannot find some hidden flaw or at least some error in interpretation.

The conservationist's claim for the importance of the earth, as the foundation of human life and civilization, seems sound enough as far as it goes; and if we challenge it he will point to once flourishing cultures which languished and died because they failed to take sufficient care of the soil that supported them. It seems more likely that we were confused by the reasoning which led us to regard our planet as a negligible constituent of the Universe. This is a question of evaluation, a deli-



cate subject in which one may go far astray merely by placing his emphasis at the wrong point. Although the astronomer furnishes data which must be taken into account in this evaluation, the problem itself is not so much astronomical as philosophical; for science deals only with facts, and values are beyond its province. Without challenging the astronomer's facts, we may consider whether certain inferences commonly drawn from them are sound.

Space and Matter

The most obvious components of the Universe are space and matter. Space, although not the void extension it is often assumed to be, seems to us significant chiefly as the container of the matter. Spectroscopic analysis of light from distant stars reveals that they are composed of elements known to occur on this earth; and if one star differs from another in its material composition, this is because the elements are present in different proportions rather than because it contains kinds of matter peculiar to itself. We know from observation of the things that closely surround us that the matter of the Universe is capable of assuming a wide range of forms, some of which are of great beauty. On the grand scale it makes mountains, valleys, lakes, and clouds. On a small scale it produces a vast variety of crystals, including glittering gems and exquisite snowflakes, and an endless array of living things from microscopic monads to stately trees and from the bizarre creatures of the seas to lovely flowers, butterflies, and birds.

And these living things, or at least some of them, are endowed with consciousness, so that they can feel and even think and respond to the beauty around them. Whether sentience is a property of matter is a debatable question, yet as far as we have positive evidence it is always closely associated with matter in complex living forms. Moreover, some of these conscious beings, taking the plastic stuff which surrounds them, fashion it into still other beautiful or useful forms.

Although all the matter in the Universe seems intrinsically capable of assuming these more elaborate forms,

in any period measurable by us only an exceedingly small proportion of it can do so. Possibly half the matter in the cosmos occurs in dust-clouds, or is still more thinly scattered through interstellar space; and in this diffuse state its formative powers are narrowly limited. Most of the rest of the matter seems to be in the incandescent stars, whose temperatures, especially toward the interior, are so high that even complete atoms cannot persist, for their agitation is so great that their electrons become detached. In such conditions, all the more elaborate forms of matter, such as organic bodies and crystals and even complex molecules, can never occur. A star like our sun not only lacks complex formations on the molecular scale, but it is likewise devoid of all permanent topographical features, such as mountains and seas; for its gaseous contents are in constant flux, ceaselessly changing their configuration.

Only at certain special points in the vastness of space, can the stuff of the Universe realize to the full its formative powers—where matter is neither too thinly diffused as in the dust-clouds nor too densely packed as in the interior of many of the stars, where it is not too cold as in the moon nor yet too hot as in the sun. The optimum conditions for such evolution of matter appear to be found at the surfaces of the planets, such as the earth and its companions in the solar system; and not all of these seem equally favorable for such development.

If stars other than our sun possessed planets, they would be invisible even with the most powerful telescopes; but in view of the peculiar train of events necessary to give birth to a planetary system, astronomers believe that most of the billions of stars lack such satellites. At best, the spots in the Universe where matter can be elaborated into complex and beautiful forms are relatively few and very far apart, occupying an almost infinitesimal proportion of the Universe's space and containing a minute fraction of its materials. And it would seem that when viewed in relation to the Whole, these little scattered masses of matter, however insignificant they may be when measured by the astronomic scale, are of the

greatest importance; for in them alone, so far as we can be sure, the potentialities present throughout the Whole can be realized. Without these tiny spheres of more solid matter, so widely separated and so lonely, the creative energy which pervades the Universe could never give adequate expression to its formative powers.

But these favored globules of cosmic matter could not exist, or at least could not fill their peculiar role, alone in boundless space. If they are to support the more complex aggregations of matter, they require a special environment and a vast machinery to serve them. Since they must have a solid surface at a moderate temperature, their outer layer must be too cool to emit light or even much heat. Hence the light and gentle warmth essential for vital processes must come from some external source. If this source is to continue to supply energy for the many millions of years which life requires to evolve into its higher forms, it must be of vast size as well as at a very high temperature. It is evident that it must be situated at a great distance from the planet it serves; otherwise, it would send an excessive amount of heat to it, or draw it into its fiery mass by gravitational attraction.

A cosmic engineer planning a heating and lighting system for our earth, with the condition that for hundreds of millions of years a large portion of its surface could not fluctuate in temperature beyond the relatively narrow range between the freezing and boiling points of water, would find it necessary to assign a huge amount of material to the power plant, and to spread his system over a vast sweep of space. It would be a mistake to judge the significance of the body, so warmed and illuminated, merely on the basis of its own dimensions; we should form a truer estimate of its importance by noticing the size of the arrangement which serves it.

It is evident that those who affirm that the earth is an insignificant part of the Universe judge childishly by size alone, overlooking its privileged position as one of the few points amidst the immensity of space where the creative process can reach higher levels. Thus this planet, and possibly a few other

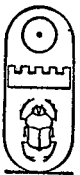
satellites of the sun and other stars, have a cosmic importance all out of proportion to their size. And in the measure that we appreciate the significance of our little earth in the total scheme of things, it will become impossible for us to regard it merely as a means to be exploited for human use, differing from the machinery and apparatus we make to serve our purposes only in being far bigger, more complex, and irreplaceable.

We shall realize that the earth would still be an outstandingly important member of the Universe even if mankind should disappear from it, provided only that the creative process, which made us, continued to go forward on it, possibly to produce some form of life more admirable than man. On the wider view, humanity may be significant chiefly as part of the total complex of beings which the creative energy has brought forth in this part of space, so that if it finally proves to be an incompatible element of the whole assemblage its value will decline and possibly even become negative.

Lest We Perish

The recognition that the earth occupies too important a position in the Universe for us to treat it merely as a means to human ends will inevitably influence our attitude toward it. The surface of this planet must continue to serve us, lest we perish; but at the same time we must serve it with love and devotion, lest a fate far worse than physical starvation overtake us—the fate of dying spiritually. The realization of the earth's importance will cause us to take thought not only of its productivity in foodstuffs, textiles, lumber, and minerals, but likewise of its beauty and life. We shall cherish its mountains and woodlands for their grandeur and the marvelous variety of living things they support, making every effort to prevent the disappearance of any of them, and doing all we can to maintain such conditions that new forms may continue to evolve. By this course we shall show that we appreciate our planet's outstanding and possibly unique position in the cosmos and are grateful for the privilege of dwelling upon it.

If the habit of looking upon the earth as an end to be served rather than as a



means to be exploited became widespread and general, it would give a new impetus to international cooperation and help to cement the fellowship of mankind. When we exploit the earth for the marketable products it yields, we are interested in getting as much as we can from it. We may talk generously about "an abundance for all," but even with the most careful husbandry we shall be fortunate if there is a bare sufficiency for the world's teeming billions of men, who like other animals tend constantly to reproduce up to the limit of their means of subsistence.

People whose hearts are set upon material things are never satisfied with a bare sufficiency; they want more and more. As individuals and nations, they wish to surpass their neighbors in wealth and display. Hence, despite all their professed altruism, which so embellishes the speeches of politicians, they compete with each other for natural resources and markets, and they envy or hate the neighbors who exceed them in prosperity. Finally, growing jealousies lead to wars, which at an accelerated pace deplete the resources of the planet, destroy its beauty, and do incalculable harm to the whole community of living things.

Service to the world as an end has an effect just the contrary to that of

exploiting it as a means, uniting men in cooperation rather than dividing them in competition. We now know enough about the planetary circulation of air and water, the migrations of living things, and the effects of conditions in one country upon the natural community of neighboring regions, to be convinced that the effort to preserve the grandeur and beauty of the earth must be an international undertaking if it is to be successful. Men who cooperate sincerely in a common endeavor vie with each other, not to get the most for themselves, but to perform the greatest service to their cause. Moreover, the common admiration of something too grand to be held as a personal possession draws men together in spiritual fellowship.

People with an adequate appreciation of the glory of their planet and what they owe to it might possibly fight with bows, slings, and swords, but they would under no circumstances go to war with modern weapons which work such havoc upon the whole earth, scarring its face, depleting its bounty, poisoning its lands and waters, maiming and destroying countless living things in addition to the belligerents themselves. When we cultivate piety to the earth as to a mother, we shall all dwell together in peace and happiness as her devoted children.



Our Ancestors

It has always been the contention of mystical philosophy that man was a separate and distinct creation and not the offspring of a lower form such as the ape. This contention is presently gaining support.

Fossils found in coal mines near Tuscany, Italy, in 1872, and thought to be a variety of mountain apes, are now considered to be the remains of 10-million-year-old human beings.

Dr. Johannes Hurzler, curator of vertebrate paleontology at the Natural History Museum in Basle, Switzerland,

recently made the statement that he is convinced that these particular fossils are direct ancestors of modern man.

Dr. Helmut de Terra, Columbia University geologist who shared in the findings, said that the study definitely challenges the concept of man's descent from apes.

Curiosity has been aroused as to how these men appeared in face and figure. It is believed that many of the more complete specimens have been burned or destroyed with the coal and a search for the missing parts continues.