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Thinking Like a Mountain: Nature, Wilderness, and the Virtue of Humility

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The Ideal of Nature

Debates about Biotechnology and the Environment

Edited by

Gregory E. Kaebnick

Scholar and Editor, *Hastings Center Report*

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Thinking like a Mountain

Nature, Wilderness, and the Virtue of Humility

Paul Lauritzen, M.A., Ph.D.

Ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down, in the last analysis, to a question of intellectual humility.

—ALDO LEOPOLD, *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC*

Aldo Leopold begins his famous essay “Thinking like a Mountain” by evoking the haunting call of a wolf. “A deep chesty bawl,” he writes, “echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world.” Leopold suggests that the cry of the wolf quickens the pulse of all sentient beings, whether in anticipation of a meal from the gleanings of a hunt or in fear of the blood that may be so spilled. “Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.”

Talk of “thinking like a mountain” is perhaps overly dramatic, but Leopold has a point in suggesting that experience with wilderness may have something to teach us about intellectual humility. Indeed, I want to suggest that the recognition of the need to cultivate certain virtues, especially humility, may stand behind many of the appeals to “nature” that we find in discussions of medical biotechnology, agricultural biotechnology, and environmentalism. To explore the connection among ideas of “wilderness,” “nature,” and particular virtues, I want to look

briefly at two writers who have wrestled with these connections in compelling ways, Cormac McCarthy and Wendell Berry.¹ There are dangers in appealing to writers whose reflections on wilderness and nature are not conducted within the standard frame of bioethical concerns, but perhaps for that very reason there is wisdom to be found in their writings. Or at least that is what I hope to show. Thus, in the first part of this chapter, I will examine Cormac McCarthy’s explorations of wilderness motifs. In the second part, I will turn to consider Wendell Berry’s appeals to wilderness and nature.

Cormac McCarthy

Although most of McCarthy’s work would be instructive for our purposes, the book on which I will primarily focus is the second volume of his border trilogy, *The Crossing*. *The Crossing* is a complex, sprawling work, but for our purposes, part one of the book, which comprises 127 pages, is the core. Set in 1939 in New Mexico, this section tells the story of sixteen-year-old Billy Parham, who with his father and brother sets out to trap a wolf that has begun to prey on cattle in the range. The story opens with a passage that displays the force of McCarthy’s writing, as well as his conviction that there is value in closely observing the “natural” world without seeking to bend it to one’s will.

Shortly after the family arrives in the valley they will call home, a very young Billy wakes to the howling of wolves in the hills. He decides to take a look. Here is how McCarthy describes the scene:

When he passed the barn the horses whimpered softly to him in the cold. The snow creaked under his boots and his breath smoked in the bluish light. An hour later he was crouched in the snow in the dry creekbed where he knew the wolves had been. . . .

They were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight and their breath smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire. . . .

There were seven of them and they passed within twenty feet of where he lay. He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air. They bunched and nuzzled and licked one another. Then they stopped. They stood

with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. They stood. Then they turned and quietly trotted on. (1994, p. 4)

Those unfamiliar with McCarthy's work might come upon this passage and expect a kind of sentimental and romanticized nature story to follow. They would be mistaken, for in this novel, as in all his fiction, McCarthy is unflinching in depicting the violence he sees everywhere in nature, including human nature. Nor is he inclined to be elegiac about the loss of a wilderness untrammelled by humans. For McCarthy, the idea of preserving the natural environment cannot accommodate the violence of the earth's history in which species come and go, both with and without human help. What, then, of human technology?

McCarthy has no illusions about the threat that human technology poses for the earth, but in *The Crossing* McCarthy's vision is not totally apocalyptic. Nor is there any choice here; humans can use it thoughtfully or recklessly, but they will use technology. Indeed, we see this early on as Billy and his father seek to trap the wolf using the longspring traps of a legendary wolf trapper, W. C. Echols, whose years of tracking and studying wolves provided a sort of technical expertise. The narrator's ambivalence about these tools is palpable. On the one hand, Billy's relation to the traps is described almost lovingly: "Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was" (p. 22). Echols is admiringly characterized as "about half wolf himself" (p. 19). On the other hand, there is an ominous quality to the tools of this trade. Echols's vials of scents for bait have the smell of death about them. "In the jars dark liquids. Dried viscera. Liver, gall, kidneys. The inward parts of the beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood" (p. 17). The anthropomorphism of this passage is uncharacteristic, but the concern about the unconstrained and ceaseless use of technology to trap wolves to the point of extinction is not.²

The contrast to such unreflective use of technology, then, is Billy Parham's pursuit of the wolf. Although the initial efforts to catch her are unsuccessful, Billy perseveres and eventually traps the wolf. When he does, he realizes the wisdom

of the mysterious and oracular hunter, Don Arnulfo, who has cautioned him about the self-absorption of men who see only the immediate: "acts of their own hands" and not the larger world in which they act. In dialogue that recalls the opening scene of the book, Arnulfo explains, "If you want to see the wolf, you have to see it on its own ground. If you catch it, you lose it" (p. 46). Although Billy has planned to kill the wolf and goes so far as to raise the rifle to shoot her, in the end he cannot take her life. Instead, he decides to muzzle and tether the wolf in order to return her to the mountains of Mexico from whence she came. For the next seventy-five pages we witness the destructive and bloody fate of the wolf, who, in being caught, has been lost.

Although Billy will not be able to save the wolf or the pups she carries, he is, nevertheless, steadfast in his efforts. Indeed, it is instructive to attend to Billy's doomed attempt to return the wolf to Mexico and thus avoid her killing. For example, although Billy talks to the wolf and sings to her, it is clear that he does not think of her as his property or his pet. At several points in the narrative, Billy insists that she has been entrusted to his care and that he has no intention of treating her instrumentally (see pp. 60, 70, 90, and 110). Indeed, a recurring theme is that Billy could easily treat the wolf as property and make money from her, which is precisely what almost every other character in the book tries to do. For example, several characters offer to buy the wolf; one expects that Billy will sell her hide or collect the bounty for her. When the wolf is confiscated from Billy in Mexico, she becomes part of a sideshow at a fair, where circus-goers pay to see the "man-eating" wolf. Ultimately, she is set to fighting dogs in an old cock-fighting pit, as men from surrounding towns drink and bet and otherwise find amusement in the spectacle. At every point, Billy fiercely resists this instrumentalization of the wolf. He repeatedly rejects offers of money for her and, in the end, he kills her himself rather than allow her to continue to be mistreated in the fighting pit.

The irony, of course, and the point that emerges most forcefully from part one of *The Crossing* is that Billy himself did not foresee and could not control the consequences of his use of the technology of the traps. At the beginning of part one, Billy has gone out without traps, without a rifle, without even his horse, to find and merely watch the wolves. At the end, Billy can only imagine wolves running the range because during the ten years that Billy's family has lived in New Mexico humans have essentially eradicated the wolf. Even the wolf that Billy desperately tried to save has been killed. The closing paragraph of part one is thus a striking contrast to its opening paragraphs: "He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire gave no

light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her . . . He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh" (p. 127).

Let me now quickly shift gears to suggest how reflecting on *The Crossing* may be helpful to our deliberations on appeals to nature in bioethics. I will take as my point of departure a claim that Greg Kaebnick makes in an essay entitled, "Putting Views about Nature into Context: The Case of Agricultural Biotechnology." According to Kaebnick, appeals to "nature" appear to be quite different depending on whether they are made in debates about medical biotechnology, agricultural biotechnology, or environmentalism. "The result," he says, "is that the three domains look to be distinct from each other, and the associated views of nature have little to do with each other" (2007, p. 6). Nevertheless, Kaebnick believes that there may be a commonality among these appeals to nature that is captured by the conviction that there is value in "resisting the urge to re-engineer natural states of affairs."

I take this suggestion to be that although "nature" may be defined in very different ways in each of these domains, and so resist any articulation of a positive definition of the term, we can still ask: What worry stands behind the effort to differentiate the "natural" from the "unnatural"? We can usefully ask a variation of that question in relation to *The Crossing*. Why is such a sharp contrast drawn between the situation of the wolves in New Mexico at the beginning of the narrative compared to that at the end of part one? What should we make of the contrast that is highlighted repeatedly between Billy's attitude to the wolf and the attitude of others in the story?

The answer to these questions is suggested by Leopold's observation that the cultural value of wilderness is that experience with wilderness may help us to cultivate humility. In this regard, perhaps the key figure in part one of the book is the trapper Don Arnulfo. Billy has gone to Arnulfo to get more bait with which to trap the wolf because Arnulfo is thought to know almost as much about catching wolves as Echols. But Arnulfo tells Billy that he cannot help him and that the idea that Echols "knows what the wolf knows before the wolf knows it" is mistaken. The wolf, he says, is unknowable. You can trap a wolf, but then you do not have a wolf; you have only "teeth and fur." Indeed, Arnulfo appears to regard

Billy's quest to trap the wolf as pure folly. It is the folly of assuming that we can impose order on the world short of the grave. Arnulfo is emphatic: "He said that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there. Finally he said that if men drink the blood of God yet they do not understand the seriousness of what they do. He said that men wish to be serious but they do not understand how to be so. Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the act of their own hand or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them" (p. 46).

When we ask how a conception of "nature" or "wilderness" may provide guidance in thinking about environmental issues, the answer that seems to come from *The Crossing* is that attending to this "invisible" world that is obscured in the human quest for mastery may provide us with lessons in humility.³ In one sense, what emerges from *The Crossing* is thus a view akin to that articulated by Michael Sandel in relation to medical biotechnology. In *The Case against Perfection*, Sandel contrasts the "drive to mastery" with a recognition that human life is a gift to be cherished rather than improved on. The sense in which the moral vision of *The Crossing* is like Sandel's is that it laments the obsessive willfulness, the "hyperagency," as Sandel puts it, that seeks to control everything. There is, says Sandel, "something appealing, even intoxicating about a vision of human freedom unfettered by the given," but that vision of freedom is deeply flawed. It leaves us "with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will" (2007, pp. 99–100). Indeed, even Billy Parham can be accused of a kind of hubris in thinking that he can trap the wolf and trail it to Mexico with impunity.

Yet it seems to me that McCarthy would be much less sanguine than Sandel about appealing to the givenness of nature as a moral guide. In that respect, the contrasts between "nature" and "culture," "man" and "nature," or "wilderness" and "nonwilderness" are like many of the borders that are transgressed throughout the book. They are shifting boundaries that are dangerous liminal states. Billy notes at one point that the wolf recognizes no border between the United States and Mexico, but of course it is the crossing of this border that leads to the wolf's death. Indeed, the only fixed boundary is death.

If we return to the questions with which we began this section, we can perhaps now state more directly the concern that haunts most of McCarthy's reflections on the natural world and humanity's relationship to it. Recall that the first question

concerned the sharp contrast between the range where there is scarcely any boundary between wolves and humans and one where that boundary is sharply enforced. If we in fact attend to the various boundaries that are described throughout the novel, we observe McCarthy's insistence that borders and boundaries are fluid. They are drawn and redrawn, crossed and recrossed. At first, this might suggest that McCarthy will be of little help to our project, for appeals to nature are frequently made in an effort to set limits—to set boundaries—on what humans may legitimately do to the environment or livestock or themselves. Yet McCarthy's vision appears to question the usefulness of such a mindset. We can describe human nature in a way that attempts to draw a boundary that should not be transgressed, but doing so is a bit like trapping a wolf. A wolf in a trap is not a wolf; a human locked into some essential and unchanging nature is not human. At the same time, McCarthy paints an exquisite picture of the fragility of both the natural world and our relationship to this world and to each other. Nowhere is this more beautifully or hauntingly captured than in McCarthy's novel *The Road*.

The Road tells the story of a father and son who have survived what is presumably a nuclear attack on the United States. They wander in a desolate landscape in which "the frailty of everything [was] revealed at last" (2006, p. 24). Uncharacteristically, the book ends on an optimistic note. When the father dies, the son encounters a family that invites the boy to join them. It is one of the few gestures of "humanity" displayed in the book. Despite this optimism, the book ends with a cautionary paragraph that could be said to sum up McCarthy's worldview entire, as one of his characters might say. It is the last paragraph of the book: "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their back were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (p. 241).

This is the central worry of *The Crossing*: human overreaching has the potential irrevocably to change the world in ways that humans cannot, or at least do not, begin to comprehend. And some things, when they are changed, cannot be made right again. In exercising our power, whether in relation to the environment or in relation to agricultural or biomedical technology, the appropriate attitudes are awe and respect for the mystery of the world around us. The appropriate vir-

tue is humility. Instead, we act like "a god insatiable whom no ceding could appease."

Wendell Berry

The second writer to whom I turn for help in thinking about appeals to "nature" and "wilderness," Wendell Berry, is a novelist and poet, and, like Cormac McCarthy, he has an impressive list of literary awards. Berry's fiction demonstrates a keen appreciation of the value of nature and wilderness as a school of virtue for his characters, but it is in his remarkable collection of essays that Berry most fully articulates an account of the relationship between nature—significantly not in scare quotes—and virtue.

To appreciate Berry's body of work, one must place it in the context of his lifelong commitment to a Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, for much of his writing is occasioned by concern for the decline of rural America and the family farm. Indeed, his ruminations about nature and wilderness are framed in terms of the cultural costs of losing a sense of connection between our bodies and the land they inhabit. We have come to act as if we are not embodied beings with an inextricable connection to the land. We see this in the idea that we have moved to an information economy. But as Berry caustically observes, "the idea that we have now progressed from a land-based economy to an economy based on information is a fantasy" (2005, p. 114). And it is, Berry says, a fantasy that could be fatal. We have so deluded ourselves about our necessary relation to and dependence on the land that we imperil our long-term survival.

Although the cultural critique that Berry offers is spread out over at least a half-dozen volumes, spanning thirty-five plus years, I want to focus primarily on a handful of essays that delineate almost all the major themes in his work.⁴ Most of Berry's writing is rooted in his life as a farmer in rural Kentucky, and all of his best work is directly connected to his attempt to understand (and reverse) what he takes to be the dramatic decline in the agrarian ideal in American life. Let us start with his diagnosis of the ills that confront the family farmer in the United States and of how we got in such a condition.

According to Berry, American agriculture has been in decline at least since the end of World War II. He recognizes that the idea that American agriculture is in decline will likely appear counterintuitive because the postwar period has seen enormous increases both in overall production and in production per acre. Yet

that productivity is directly correlated with the decline he bemoans because the increased yields have come from embracing an industrial model of agriculture that has devastated the land and is not sustainable in the long run.

An industrial model of agriculture comprises an interlocking set of approaches to science, economics, and farming that are yoked together by what Berry describes as an industrial logic. As the logic is applied to agricultural science, it reduces farming to a mere mechanical or chemical process. Economically, industrial logic leads us to treat workers, in this case, farmers, "no different from raw materials or machine parts" (2005, p. 79). Berry writes that promoters of such a view "believe that a farm or a forest is or ought to be the same as a factory; that care is only minimally involved in the use of the land; . . . that for all practical purposes a machine is as good as (or better than) a human; that the industrial standards of production, efficiency, and profitability are the only standards that are necessary; that the topsoil is lifeless and inert; [and] that soil biology is safely replaceable by soil chemistry" (1996, p. 410).

The consequences of treating a farm essentially as a machine are, however, disastrous. Yes, productivity—measured solely as yield per acre—has increased but so, too, have the use of chemicals, the erosion of topsoil, and rates of foreclosures on family farms. Farms have become bigger, less diverse, and so disconnected from local communities—indeed from those who do the work on the farm—that "the result is utterly strange in human experience: farm families who buy everything they eat at the store" (2005, p. 97).

And the industrial model is not confined simply to matters of food production. Berry notes that both farms *and forests* have come to be thought of in industrial or mechanical terms. He also observes the baleful effects of thinking of nature in these reductive terms. The traditional respect, reverence, and awe with which humans approached nature have been lost. In their place, we find a consumerist mindset that sees nature merely as raw material to be used without limit or constraint. "By means of the machine metaphor," Berry writes, "we have eliminated any fear or awe or reverence or humility or delight or joy that might have restrained us in our use of the world" (1986, p. 56). As Berry puts it elsewhere, we grope obsessively and destructively toward the use of everything (1995, p. 2).

If this is Berry's critique of an industrial worldview as it applies to our understanding of nature, what does he suggest as an alternative? Not surprisingly, his model for approaching the natural world is taken from the ideal of an old-fashioned farmer. Berry draws a distinction between someone whose fundamental commitment is to control and maximize short-term productivity with someone whose

core value is nurture and sustenance. If the latter is best represented by a traditional farmer, the former is represented by the quintessential exploiter, a strip miner. "The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health. . . . Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: . . . What can it produce dependably for an indefinite time? . . . The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, 'hard facts'; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind" (1986, pp. 7–8). Ultimately, Berry believes debates about our conceptions of nature and wilderness are tied to issues of character and its definition. In a chapter in *The Unsettling of America* entitled "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character," he makes clear that loss of the virtue of self-restraint goes hand-in-glove with an instrumentalist conception of nature as something controlled by us, as if we were not fundamentally a part of nature.

Here we circle back to connect with Cormac McCarthy's view of nature and wilderness set out in the first part of this chapter, for Berry shares with McCarthy an appreciation of the virtue of humility and its relation to conceptions of nature and of wilderness. Indeed, both Berry and McCarthy urge us to a greater sense of respect and reverence for nature. The language of reverence here may suggest that both writers adopt an essentially religious understanding of nature, but drawing that conclusion would, I think, be mistaken. To be sure, some of Berry's writings are explicitly religious, but his defense of a reverential view of nature and its relation to the virtue of humility is not.

We can see this in an essay from *A Continuous Harmony* entitled "A Secular Pilgrimage." In it, Berry turns to poetry to capture what he understands the proper attitude to nature to be. Writing about contemporary poets who turn to nature not just for symbols or metaphors but for subject matter and inspiration, Berry says that "their art has an implicit and essential humility, a reluctance to impose on things as they are, a willingness to relate to the world as student and servant, a wish to be included in the natural order rather than to 'conquer nature'" (1972, p. 4). This attitude requires no institutional religious framework, not for that matter does it require a belief in god. But it can still be spoken of as a pilgrimage because it involves a quest for meaning that requires us to situate ourselves harmoniously in the world around us.

Once again, there is an instructive parallel with Michael Sandel's position in *The Case against Perfection*. I already noted how Sandel contrasts humility with

what he refers to as “hyperagency” and the drive to mastery, and that, in this regard, his vision of the human tendency to disregard limits is similar to Cormac McCarthy’s. A closer look at Sandel’s argument also sheds light on Wendell Berry’s ideas of a “secular pilgrimage.” In decrying the “drive to mastery,” Sandel articulates what he refers to as an “ethic of giftedness,” namely, an ethic that approaches human life as a gift. In developing the idea of the giftedness of human life, Sandel draws on William F. May’s notion of an “openness to the unbidden” (2007, p. 45). “May’s resonant phrase describes a quality of character and heart that restrains the impulse to mastery and control and prompts a sense of life as gift” (p. 46). The idea that life is a gift, like the notion of a pilgrimage, can be understood in religious terms, but it need not be. As Sandel points out, we frequently speak of an athlete’s or a musician’s gift without presupposing that the gift came from God (p. 93). Instead, the idea of life as a gift, like the idea of life as a pilgrimage, is meant to combat what he calls the “Promethean ambition to remake nature” (p. 26) and what Berry refers to as technology’s “totalitarian desire for absolute control” (1986, p. 130).

Sandel’s analysis of an ethic of giftedness, an ethic that requires us to resist the drive to mastery, helps us appreciate how the appeal to nature and wilderness functions for Berry. The key is Sandel’s recognition that an ethic of giftedness is reciprocally related to the virtue of humility. An appreciation for the gifted character of human powers and achievements is conducive to the cultivation of humility, and the virtue of humility helps us resist the urge to remake the world (2007, pp. 26–27). The familiar categories of autonomy and rights or calculations of costs and benefits do not exhaust the moral issues at stake; for one thing, these categories are understood too narrowly in individualistic terms. Instead, what is crucial is the “habit of mind and way of being” that an ethic of giftedness seeks to foster (p. 96).

Sandel’s language beautifully captures the essence of Berry’s view because the industrial worldview Berry decries could well be described as a “habit of mind and a way of being.” As we have seen, according to Berry it is a habit of mind that “gropes obsessively and destructively toward the use of everything.” And when this worldview is combined with a liberal individualist ethos, the result is a way of being that presupposes a “‘right’ of individuals to do as they please, as if there were no God, no legitimate government, no community, no neighbors, and no posterity” (2005, p. 9).

What does Berry offer as an alternative habit of mind and way of being? The answer is put forcefully in a collection of essays whose title, *The Way of Ignorance*, gestures toward Berry’s response. This title is intentionally provocative. Berry is

not, of course, recommending or praising ignorance; instead, he is commending a way of being that recognizes the limits of our knowledge and the dangers of failing to acknowledge our limits. I would be inclined toward a different formulation of Berry’s title, perhaps “the way of mystery” or “the way of wonder,” but the essential features of such a worldview would be the same. If an industrial worldview is preoccupied with control and “hyperagency,” the way of wonder emphasizes preservation and modesty.

The connection between the way of wonder and wilderness is captured succinctly in Berry’s essay “The Journey’s End.” “Going to the woods and the wild places has little to do with recreation, and much to do with creation. For the wilderness is the creation in its pure state, its processes unqualified by the doings of people. A man in the woods comes face to face with the creation, of which he must begin to see himself a part—a much less imposing part than he thought. And seeing that the creation survives all wishful preconceptions about it, that it includes him only upon its own sovereign terms, that he is not free except in his proper place in it, then he may begin, perhaps, to take a hand in the creation of himself” (1995b, p. 6). Although Berry gets carried away here with his talk of “creation in its pure state,” the core idea strikes me as both sound and insightful. Wilderness can help us appreciate nature on its terms rather than ours. “As long as we insist on relating to it strictly on our own terms—as strange to us or subject to us—the wilderness is alien, threatening, fearful. We have no choice then but to become its exploiters, and to lose, by consequence, our place in it. It is only when, by humility, openness, generosity, courage, we make ourselves able to relate to it on its terms that it ceases to be alien” (p. 6).

Nature and Human Overreaching

If we compare Berry’s work to McCarthy’s, we can see that although there is much they might not agree on, they do have a fundamental commonality of vision. Both recommend cultivating a set of virtues that constrain human overreaching. Both endorse a habit of mind and a way of being in the world that understands and accepts the limits of human knowledge. And both believe that careful attention to nature, and especially to wilderness, promotes what Aldo Leopold referred to as “thinking like a mountain.” Such is their mutual vision, but is this vision useful to our project? I believe that it is, but it will not be useful in any easy way because it is more about cultivating certain virtues than about identifying prohibited actions or practices.

We can perhaps better see the complex utility of this vision by examining a recent effort to assess appeals to nature in bioethics. In an essay entitled "Human Nature and Enhancement," Allen Buchanan reviews various appeals to the idea of "human nature" in debates about whether it is morally acceptable to enhance human beings through biotechnology. Buchanan notes that opponents of enhancement technology frequently argue that genetic enhancement will destroy human nature and that destroying or fundamentally changing humans is either *per se* wrong or wrong because doing so will strip us of the ability to make moral judgments, given that such judgments are tied to a stable conception of human nature.

In evaluating these claims, Buchanan identifies five different forms of the appeal to human nature and argues that all five are fatally flawed. The five forms are human nature understood as (1) a condition of moral agency; (2) a feasibility constraint on morality; (3) a constraint on the good for humans; (4) a source of substantive moral rules; and (5) a complex whole of interdependent characteristics (2009, p. 5). The details of Buchanan's analysis are not crucial for us here. What is crucial is that each kind of appeal is mobilized to suggest either that altering human nature is intrinsically wrong or that doing so will have such disastrous moral consequences that changing our natures is morally prohibited. Buchanan is concerned to demonstrate that appeals to "human nature" cannot ground either of these convictions and are therefore ultimately unhelpful in debates about enhancement.

By way of contrast, the sort of attention to nature and to wilderness that both McCarthy and Berry recommend is not intended to produce concrete guidelines or to support an antitechnology ethos. For example, neither McCarthy nor Berry would find altering human nature intrinsically wrong and neither would necessarily conclude that the consequences of genetically enhancing humans would be so potentially negative that we should categorically prohibit such an action. The closest they come to the positions Buchanan examines is "human nature as a complex whole." According to Buchanan, this form of argument appeals to "nature" to convey a sense of complex and harmonious interdependencies that will be disrupted as humans develop and use biotechnology. But if the appeal to "nature" is a just a shorthand way of acknowledging the "fragility of wholeness," Buchanan says, such appeals are "pernicious" because they encourage "the delusion that reflection on human nature can yield substantive moral rules." Once again, he concludes, "the appeal to human nature is eliminable without loss" (p. 20).

If the goal of appeals to nature is to generate substantive moral rules, then Buchanan is probably right. But, at least in the case of McCarthy and Berry, gen-

erating moral rules is not the point of attending to nature and to wilderness. Here, being outside the world of traditional bioethics is probably an asset because these writers are not concerned with generating rules or guidelines. Instead, they recommend attention to nature and wilderness as an exercise that is useful to the development of character. In particular, close attention to nature and personal experience with wilderness are conducive to the development of humility.

The experience of watching a wolf at night in the mountains or plowing a field on a farm during the day is not going to generate a moral calculus for making decisions about the use of biotechnology; Buchanan is right about that. Nevertheless, these kinds of activities can perhaps make us less susceptible to the pull of the Promethean ambition of humans as the masters of the universe. These and similar activities can help us to develop a proper sense of scale; they can remind us of our smallness in the universe; they can foster a sense of awe that may lead us to be more cautious in the use of our powers. Just how attention to nature and wilderness and a corresponding sense of awe and humility can be morally instructive is difficult to say, but let me end by giving an example from Berry's work that might be helpful, in part because it covers some familiar bioethics terrain.

In a superb essay entitled "Quantity vs. Form," Berry recounts the last days of one of his neighbors. "Lily," as he calls her, was suffering from heart disease, osteoporosis, and a bout of pneumonia. In Berry's words, "she was as ill probably as a living creature can be" (2005, p. 82). She was also in great pain. But Lily was reconciled to her death because she had her affairs in order and she judged her life to have been both good and complete. This, says Berry, was something the resident treating her could not understand. Trained in the ways of modern medicine, and thus driven by a technological imperative that typically fails to acknowledge that life can reach an appropriate end and that death can be "a welcome deliverance from pain or grief or weariness" (p. 85), the resident took Lily off her pain medications in the hope of increasing her appetite and getting her back on her feet. To the resident's way of thinking, Lily's death was unnecessary; to Berry's way of thinking, Lily's graceful acceptance of death was deeply admirable.

This example shows the subtle way that the habit of mind and way of being recommended by Berry can apply to difficult moral decisions. If you approach this case in terms of traditional categories of bioethical analysis, you might conclude that Berry is making an argument in favor of euthanasia or assisted suicide. But this is not what he is doing. He is not arguing for a particular position on euthanasia and appealing to nature in a prescriptive way. Instead, he is recommending the development of a more capacious worldview than one that defines

medical success in terms of days or weeks of increased longevity. And the support for such a view will not come from principles or norms of bioethics but from an appreciation of limits and genuine humility. Berry puts the point in terms that McCarthy would appreciate. Medicine's preoccupation with extending life expectancy "badly needs a meeting on open ground with tragedy, absurdity, and moral horror" (2005, p. 86). Frequently, that open ground can be found in nature and encounters with wilderness.

What Berry recommends here in thinking about end-of-life issues, he would also recommend for thinking about issues of medical biotechnology, agricultural biotechnology, and environmentalism. The last paragraph of his essay "Local Knowledge in the Age of Information" could well serve as a summary of most of Berry's work, as well as of this chapter: "Our great modern powers of science, technology, and industry are always offering themselves to us with the suggestion that we know enough to use them well, that we are intelligent enough to act without limit in our own behalf. But the evidence is now rapidly mounting against us. By living as we do, in our ignorance and our pride, we are diminishing our world and the possibility of life" (2005, p. 125). The notion of "thinking like a mountain" may seem obscure. But whatever else it means, it certainly involves acknowledging our ignorance and our misplaced pride. The virtue of humility may help us with this acknowledgment, and if McCarthy and Berry are correct, careful attention to nature and wilderness is a good place to begin the cultivation of humility.

NOTES

1. Jacqueline Scoones (2001) has made some interesting connections between McCarthy and Leopold.
2. We learn later that Echols has trapped and killed virtually all of the wolves in this land.
3. On this point, see Arnold (2002).
4. For other examples of Berry's relevant essays on this topic, see 1983, 1984, 1995a, 1999, 2002a, 2002b.

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