



Aesthetic Foundations of Ecological Responsibility

by M. Ali Lakhani

God is Beautiful, and He loves Beauty.
(Saying of Prophet Muhammad)

...the earth is beautiful only through its link with Heaven.
(Frithjof Schuon¹)

It will seem obvious to anyone considering the issue of ecological responsibility that the subject involves a moral dimension, but it may be less apparent why at its root it engages an aesthetic sensibility, one that requires us to enquire into the nature of 'beauty' itself. The apparently tenuous connection between our moral responsibility and our aesthetic sensibility may appear less remote when we consider a statement made by Henry David Thoreau (d. 1862) in his *Journal* (June 21, 1852): "The perception of beauty is a moral test." The basis for this statement is, as traditional philosophers have always known, that our discernment of reality (Truth), our moral core (Goodness), and our aesthetic sensibility (Beauty) are all inter-connected. To enquire into the nature of the world around us therefore requires us to delve into our own inner nature – in fact, to understand the very nature of Nature itself.

Medieval philosophers distinguished between '*natura naturans*' or the divine Nature in its creative essence, and '*natura naturata*' or the divine Nature in its effects. The distinction is stated by Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677) as follows²:

[B]y *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, that is ... God, in so far as he is considered as a free cause. But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from God's attributes, that is, all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.

When we speak of the 'natural world' or of the 'natural environment', and when we consider nature as the created world observable by our outer senses, we do so in its aspect of '*natura*



naturata'. But where we refer to nature in its spiritual dimension, as our inherent or primordial nature, we do so in its aspect of '*natura naturans*'. The distinction is important because from a traditional perspective, it is the spiritual dimension that is the foundation of the sensible world, and therefore it is a fundamental error to view observable reality in isolation from its inherent 'Nature'. To sever the link between outer and inner nature is to rupture the ethical and aesthetic foundation of reality, and to lose the fundamental criterion of ecological responsibility. Yet, as we shall see, it is precisely this error that underlies the modernist outlook on ecology.

The term 'ecology' was coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (d. 1919). The word is derived from two Greek words: '*oikos*' (denoting a "house, dwelling place or habitation") and '*logia*' (meaning "study of"). Ecology, in its etymological sense, is the study of our environment. It has predominantly come to mean the study of our outer environment, but there is a deeper sense in which ecology can be understood to refer to our spiritual matrix, the 'Womb of creation' in which "we live and move and have our being" (Acts, 17:28). The idea of the Womb or spiritual matrix is important in relation to this deeper meaning of 'ecology' because the substance of the metaphysical matrix is Goodness. As is

well known in Islam, the quintessential attributes of God, denoted by the Arabic terms '*Rahman*' (the intrinsically Compassionate) and '*Raheem*' (the extrinsically Merciful), are derived from the root '*rahm*' which denotes 'womb'. All of creation originates from and is nurtured in the same Womb, the spiritual matrix whose quintessence is loving-compassion and mercy. This Womb of Goodness is our true dwelling place, the environment we inhabit, and it constitutes our ontological reality and the intrinsic Nature of the world – its sacredness. This then is the spiritual dimension of ecology which we need to rediscover in order to grasp what is meant by our ecological responsibility.

It is because we are all creatures of the same "ontological dwelling place", participating in and of the same Being, that we are bound to each other both sacramentally and sacrificially, in our hearts and minds and through our actions. What we do to the world, we do in some fashion to ourselves, and vice versa. The notion that we can subsist as atomized units, disconnected from our environment, is a fallacy. The devastation we are wreaking on our outer environments (on the physical atmosphere, the rain forests and their denizens, the oceans and its creatures, the lakes and rivers, the wildlife and the animal kingdom – in short, on the beauty of the natural world) is bringing home to us its own *karmic* consequences – outwardly, through such effects as global warming, pollution, the wanton depletion of resources, scarcity, desertification, famine, disease, poverty, and communal strife; and inwardly,

through the spiritual ugliness of moral degradation – and with these the realization that our thoughts and deeds do indeed rebound upon us. But it is the link between the outer and inner that reminds us that this devastation we are experiencing originates in a deracination from our spiritual roots. We are losing our sense of beauty, our harmony and deeper connection with the world and, with these, also our true purpose on earth.

According to the Platonic formulation, "Beauty is the splendor of the True". Now the substance (or inner aspect) of Truth is Goodness, while its radiance (or outer face) is Beauty. Both Goodness and Beauty are archetypes of the Real – Forms, whose imprints are manifested ontologically and qualitatively within created things. Creation is thus intrinsically Good. Its virtues are "the result of the order and truth and art which are imparted to them" (Plato: *Gorgias*, 506D). So too Man has been made "in the fairest rectitude" (*Koran*, At-Teen, 95:4). Each creature in its own way glorifies its Maker by reflecting this intrinsic Goodness, thus hymning God's praise, while God, in a certain sense – immanently, while nevertheless remaining transcendent – lives within each of the creatures as their very substance. This substance – which in Man is his or her primordial nature (in Koranic terms, '*fitra*') – is intrinsic Goodness or loving-compassion, whose extrinsic manifestation is Beauty. Beauty is the sacred radiance of our substance, of ontological Goodness, and is the outward manifestation of inner peace, of order and harmony. "Beauty is the

intrinsic quality of right relationship"³. It is a reflection of the Eternal in the temporal, of the Infinite in the finite, of the Absolute in contingency, of the Centre in the periphery – in short, of Heaven on Earth. It is in this sense that, according to the *hadith*, "God is Beautiful and He loves Beauty". We can therefore regard Beauty as the symbolic dimension of nature, where each creature participates in and reflects an archetypal attribute deriving from and perfected in God.

The capacity to perceive beauty corresponds to our capacity to ontologically participate in its substance and thereby to reflect its radiance. This is because we cannot perceive outer beauty to the extent that we have veiled it from ourselves. In Islam, the concept of '*kuf'r*' or the metaphysical covering-up that constitutes deluded disbelief is linked to the concept of '*hijab*' or the metaphysical veiling of Man or the world from God. Creation is a veil that separates Man (and thereby his perception of the world) from God only to the extent that the separative veil is rendered opaque and dark through our spiritual blindness or self-deception, rather than translucent and luminous through the grace of spiritual illumination. For things to be metaphysically transparent, we must perceive them through the transcendent Intellect which participates in the very substance of our being. It is only when we perceive the world through the Inner Eye of the Intellect that we are able to see all things as luminous 'icons' of Goodness and as radiant aspects of Beauty – instead of perceiving them

reductively as psycho-physical entities, that is, as mere 'idols' discerned only through our outer faculties of the mind and senses. It is our spiritual faculty, our Intellect, which is the Inner Eye that can divine its selfsame substance reflected in all things by borrowing the Light of the supernal Sun – in much the same fashion as the outer eyes can perceive things of the physical world through the light of the physical sun. If we cover up the light of our own Goodness, we thereby veil ourselves from our own true nature and so place a veil between our inner self and the outer world, obscuring the reflection of its beauty.

In a certain sense, therefore, ecological responsibility entails the discipline of "polishing the mirror of our self", as the Sufis say, so that our spiritual "dwelling place" and all things within our environment can be perceived in their intrinsic radiance and beauty, in their state of metaphysical oneness and harmony, transparent to transcendence. We need to perceive the sacred beauty of the environment in the light of our spiritual matrix, our compassion-radiating Nature, in order to appreciate our purpose in relating to it. Ecological responsibility is in this sense to participate in the sacred Presence, in the archetypal Forms of Beauty that reflect our own intrinsic Goodness.

Just as outer nature (*natura naturata*) "follows from the necessity of" inner nature (*natura naturans*), so too our purpose in relation to the world is dictated by our intrinsic nature. The scripture teaches that the divine Nature is reflected in heart of Man, and in the



same passage it declares that Man is given dominion over the other creatures (*Genesis*, 1:27-28):

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

It is precisely because Man is created in the divine image that he is given dominion over the creatures. The world of outer nature is the reflection and

projection of the beatitude of our own inner nature. So, our 'dominion' over nature is not mandated to be a lordship of exploitation, based on a separative vision of reality, rather it is ordained as a stewardship, based on a unitive vision of Beauty. Man is to tame (or 'subdue') his wayward or calcifying earthly nature. In Islam, this fiduciary purpose is referred to as '*amanah*' (*Koran*, Al-'Ahzab, 33:72) or "Divine Trust". Man is entrusted to care for creation in the same way as a mother would care for her own child, aware of the intrinsic Beauty of her charge and responding to it out of the intrinsic Goodness that binds them.

It is the discernment of Beauty as intrinsic Unity ('*tawhid*') that is



the foundation of our ecological responsibility. This is the "witnessing of God" which Muslims refer to as '*Shahada*'. When we are able to "see God everywhere", recognizing that "we are not, but He alone is", when we can see our own intrinsic Goodness reflected in nature as Beauty, then we will be able to respond to its silent call, sympathetically and participatively, as to our own Self. We are the stewards of our natural environment, its guardians. It is in the end a mirror of our own nature. If we corrupt our nature, we corrupt the world. If we obscure our vision of the intrinsic Goodness of nature, our souls will reflect and have projected back only ugliness.

The tragedy of the world today is not just that there are ever fewer opportunities to experience the transforming quality of nature, but progressively less inclination.

The beauty of this world is fast disappearing and we cannot expect ever to create an equivalent.

(John Griffin, *On the Origin of Beauty*⁴)

Having outlined the spiritual roots of ecological responsibility, we can now move to an examination of how the issue tends to be approached in the modern world. One of the defining features of the modernist ethos is the

absence of a spiritual understanding of beauty. In the words of Whittall N. Perry,

The absence of beauty is metaphysically consonant with the very structure of the modern world, which exists by a negation (in the degree possible) of Principle: and in fact the deficiency is one of the most salient characteristics of the modern industrial and utilitarian civilization in all its aspects – man, politic, ideology, religion, and form – the world over. The intuition and comprehension of beauty require the operation of specific intellectual faculties which are in a state of failure or paralysis with many people today, who can hardly conceive even the possibility of beauty beyond certain rudimentary fragments... Sacred influences have receded in measure with the intellectual decline that helped produce the modern world: and man, having all but effectively eliminated – if not exterminated – the earthly reflections of supernatural beauty, is now vitiating...what remains of natural beauty, with an arrogance and spiritual blindness on a scale unmatched in the days of Sodom or Babel.⁵

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace in detail the contours of the "intellectual decline" to which Perry refers. However, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has argued in his celebrated Gifford Lectures, the source of this decline can be traced to an epistemological rupture between knowing and being, between knowledge and the substance of reality. Noting how "knowledge has become nearly completely externalized and desacralized" in the modern world, Nasr terms the intellectual history of this intellectual decline "the history of forgetfulness"⁶ – a phrase which is

no doubt intended to call to mind the traditional doctrine of "recollection", for example, in the Platonic view of learning as "*anamnesis*" or the recollection of our spiritual origin and substance, or in the Muslim view of knowledge as "*dhikr*", that is, the contemplative invocation of the divine verities, which operates as the antidote to "*ghafla*" or forgetfulness.

In pre-modern times, it was recognized that knowledge was rooted in transcendent substance, not in human reason. Thus, traditional theologians, such as St. Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) or the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or theologians within the Patristic tradition of Orthodox Christianity routinely emphasized kataphatic knowing or "the way of ignorance" and the role of grace in knowing. According to the mystical treatise, *Theologica Germanica* (XLII), "God can only be known by God" – or as, in a different tradition, the Sufi poet and metaphysician, Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (d. 1273) put it, "The sun is the proof of the sun." At the same time, it was recognized that there is within Man a spark of the divine, in the words of Meister Eckhart (d. 1327) "something uncreated and uncreatable", which is capable of knowing itself, just as the eye knows itself through the very act of its seeing, and of recognizing its selfsame substance in all things. This substance is the transcendent Spirit, and its cognitive faculty is the supra-rational Intellect (Greek, "*nous*"; Arabic "*ʿaql*"; Sanskrit, "*buddhi*"). The point here is that in traditional epistemology, knowledge is an aspect of ontology:

it is rooted in a transcendent unity of knowledge and being. Therefore, any "intellectual decline" is necessarily marked by an "aesthetic decline" – by the fragmentation of unitive consciousness manifesting in an atomized worldview divorced from its binding inner harmony.

This loss of an aesthetic sense is precisely what has occurred in modernity. Its roots can be seen, for example, in the Cartesian dualism which separates the observer from the observed, the knower from the known. By placing the subjective '*cogito*' at the center of one's knowing instead of the objective Intellect, and by supplanting the grace of Intellectual "in-sight" with merely discursive reasoning and the outward sensory perceptions on which this is based, the world has become reified and has lost its metaphysical transparency. Instead of seeing the world as an extension of our self, we are conditioned by our rationalistic ideology to view it disjunctively. The schism of mind and matter has led to the mind's obsession with anatomizing the material world as though it were a mere machine. Modern scientific methodologies which externalize reality from the observing mind have attained primacy over traditionally contemplative modes of apprehending reality, and this has contributed to the demythologizing of nature. At the same time as the world has become increasingly reduced to its merely outer, measurable, quantifiable and material aspects that conform to the strictures of scientifically sanctioned ways of knowing, so too the mind has become

increasingly reduced to its merely externally observable and psychological aspects. This reductionism has led to a worldview famously termed, by René Guénon (d. 1951) as "The Reign of Quantity", one that is marked by the degradation of qualitative reality in favour of its quantitative aspects, and by the loss of the sense of the sacred. One of the ironies of this reductionism is that the mind, being divorced from the external world, is unable to explain its own consciousness except through some sort of Kantian categorical postulate that posits its objectivity while depriving it of any experiential reality, or through a false empiricism that equates the mind with merely the material content of the brain. A further irony is that the response of post-modernism to this reductionist error is to err itself on the side of deconstructed relativism, promoting a view of reality that is so hypertrophically subjective that it lacks all objective basis for harmony.

What is lost in this horizontally reductive or subjectivized view of reality is the radiance of Beauty, the perception of reality as a beatific vision rooted in transcendence and verticality. As the world becomes increasingly objectified and reified, it becomes increasingly alluring. It exerts a centrifugal pull on the soul that is both an *attraction* to its outward aspects and a *distraction* from its inward spiritual reality. We become drawn ever compellingly to the world's outer face, seduced by its material attributes, and distracted from its inner face, the face of Beauty. We lose our beatitude and become (in Frithjof Schuon's words) "engulfed



in the restless and disappointing turmoil of superfluous things"⁷. By losing the beatific vision that is rooted in our intellectual faith ('*iman*'), we thereby lose the ethical impetus of our sacred trust ('*amanah*'), and so the very foundation of our ecological responsibility.

This centrifugal influence can be seen in modernist approaches to ecological responsibility. It is not so much that the modern world fails to comprehend that there are ecological issues to be addressed. There is a great deal of public awareness of issues such as the threats posed by nuclear weaponry or global warming, or the perils of environmental degradation from practices such as deforestation, strip mining, over-fishing, or pollution. Nor can it be justly claimed that the modern world is entirely

passive about promoting solutions to these problems through, for instance, the advocacy for nuclear disarmament or "Green" initiatives such as the responsible use of environmental resources, and the conservation and deployment of cleaner forms of energy. Rather, it is that the atrophied intellectual and aesthetic vision of modern man is increasingly limited to viewing these issues and solutions from a materialistic perspective instead of from a contemplative vision rooted in the sense of the sacred. So, for example, a common starting point for modern ecology is to reduce the world to a Gaian ecosystem that operates as a complex bio-mechanism based on processes of cybernetic feedback. In this approach, Man is seen as merely one element within a larger bio-organism,

rather than as the privileged steward of the environment who has undertaken responsibilities towards it based upon a spiritual kinship with it. Here, the world and Man are leveled and regarded only in their outward dimensions, with a corresponding loss of hierarchy. This approach, while attempting to view the universe as a whole in fact regards it only as a bio-organism, not as a transcendent Presence, as the sacred theophany whose harmony is founded in Beauty. In so doing, it disregards traditional hierarchy in which the higher (spiritual) ranks have precedence over the lower (material) orders, and traditionally elevated orders of the 'right' have precedence over the lower orders of the 'left'. This is the traditional criterion of determining priority, where, in the words of the Sufi, Rabia al-Basri (d. 801), "The Neighbour first, and then the House."⁸ A different but equally materialistic approach is based on an anthropocentric outlook that overvalues Man to the detriment of the environment, so that the intrinsic value of the natural order is lost sight of, and the value of things is gauged in terms of purely extrinsic factors such as economic or utilitarian interests. This is a common approach in modernist environmental discourse, which assesses priorities primarily on the basis of quantitative comparative evaluations. By placing materialistic human needs at the center of ecological concerns, the sacred relationship of Man and the environment, and its fiduciary foundation, is compromised. In both instances, the role of Man is either undervalued or overvalued, regarded only in its outer aspect, with

a corresponding loss of beatitude. So too, as the world is exteriorized, it loses its interior luminosity, the beatific quality of metaphysical transparency and harmony required to order Man's relationship with the world.

Our inability to see the world aright has inevitably compromised our ability to relate to it. The desacralization of knowledge and our corresponding loss of beatitude has led to the desacralization of language, and it is a short step from there to environmental degradation. It is said in the Koran that God "taught Adam the names of all things" (*Koran*, Al-Baqarah, 2:31). Paradisal language was sacred because it was a reflection of the beatific vision. Our forgetfulness of the "names" represents a spiritual insensitivity, a corruption of nature. It is easier to destroy life when we are no longer able to think of it as such but as mere 'raw materials' or 'inventory' –as for example when forests are treated as 'lumber', cattle as 'livestock', or fish as 'harvest'. As we have written elsewhere⁹,

What we cannot readily identify is easy to violate. This is the genesis of environmental degradation, mankind's loss of its linguistic heritage, of the Adamic gift to know the names of all things. To name a creature is in a way to identify its soul, to relate it to one's own. The modernist consciousness thinks of steak or beef, not of cows; ham or bacon, not of pigs; this is the language that produces the ethos of the battery hen, of canned and packaged foods known by brand names rather than by their natural contents.

There can be no basis for ecological responsibility when we commodify the

world and monetize our values. And yet, this is precisely what we are led to by our loss of spiritual vision. We are driven by our materialist vision to pursue destructive ends through an illusory progressivism. By abandoning our spiritual view of reality, we truncate our vision, limiting ourselves to merely material ends and in so doing inevitably diminish our humanity and destroy the environment that sustains us. In Nasr's words¹⁰,

The reduction of man to a merely terrestrial being with merely earthly needs and desires, but earthly needs and desires without limits, cannot but lead to the destruction of the terrestrial environment itself.

Sadly, this is precisely the path that our diminished view of reality is leading us to. It is our inner disharmony that is reflected in the devastation of the outer environment.

Earth, isn't this what you want, to arise
Invisibly within us?

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*,
Ninth Elegy)

Our responsibility to the world must commence with the restoration of our inner beatitude and of the beatific vision that "All that lives is holy". The Earth is not a mere mechanism but a sacred Presence. It is the reflection of that Heaven which lies within the mirror of our soul. It is by recovering access to our primordial nature that we can contemplate the natural world as a theophany – as the continually renewing

sacred Presence of which Man is but a part. It is by this sacramental restitution of the inner sense of sacred harmony that we can rediscover the true praxis of ecological responsibility, which is sacrifice – that is, "making things sacred".

All life is transient in its existential sense, yet is eternal in its sacred dimension. Our ecological responsibility is to treat life as sacred, to regard it as the expression of divine Beauty, and to respond to it out of the compassionate depths of our own primordial nature, which, like its substance, is intrinsically Good. It is by the restoration of our inner beauty that we can recover the outer equilibrium that is the goal of ecological responsibility.

We have argued in this paper that modern Man is in dire need to effect a restoration of that aesthetic sensibility by which he can perceive nature as a sacred Presence. However, we emphasize that, no matter how distracting and seductive the world may be, the means for resisting its allure is close at hand. It is within our very own substance, in the grace of our inherent nature, that Goodness and Beauty reside, as a gift from the All-Compassionate and All-Merciful, whose Nature we share. It is by the Light of our inner Goodness and Beauty that we see those selfsame qualities reflected in the outer world. It is by discovering what is sacred within our souls that we can discover "the dearest freshness deep down things"¹¹, and only then can we fulfill the burden of our Trust and restore our harmony with nature.

Notes

- 1 Schuon, Frithjof, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2006, p. 37
- 2 Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics* 1, Scholium Proposition 29
- 3 Satish Kumar, from his Foreword to John Griffin's *On the Origin of Beauty: Ecophilosophy in the Light of Traditional Wisdom*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2011, p. ix
- 4 Griffin, John, *On the Origin of Beauty: Ecophilosophy in the Light of Traditional Wisdom*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2011, p.261
- 5 Perry, Whitall N., *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Quinta Essentia, Cambridge 1991 (first published 1971), pp. 659-660
- 6 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, SUNY, NY, 1989, p. 3
- 7 Schuon, Frithjof, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2006, p. 34
- 8 Quoted in Whitall N. Perry's *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, supra, p.780
- 9 Lakhani, M. Ali, *The Timeless Relevance of Traditional Wisdom*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2010, Essays; Foreword by Reza Shah-Kazemi, Introduction by William Stoddart; "On Cultivating Awareness", p.101
- 10 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Man and Nature: Quest for Renewed Understanding", *Sophia*, Volume 10 (2) 2004, p.9
- 11 Hopkins, Gerard Manley, from his poem "God's Grandeur".

