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The Pastoral and Progressive Visions

> Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth.
>
> —*Micah 6:1–2*

> Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.
>
> —*Psalms 8:5–6*

During the last few decades there has been a growing awareness of the environmental problems generated by modern societies, as well as an increase in the intensity and magnitude of these problems. In the late 1950s and early 1960s a relatively small number of American scientists, such as Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner, became alarmed by the environmental consequences of atmospheric nuclear testing and the widespread use of chemical pesticides. Although the writings of these early environmentalists were often bitterly attacked, they gained some positive attention and popularity. It was not until Earth Day 1970, however, that the modern environmental movement began to develop a broad base of support. Twenty years later, environmentalism is no longer a fringe movement or concern—Republican and Democratic politicians alike attempt to appeal to voters on the basis of their sensitivity to environmental issues, and the voters themselves, if public opinion data are to be trusted, have strong environmental concerns and commitments.[1] At least part of this concern is due to the development of global and potentially catastrophic environmental problems: global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, the pollution of the air and water around every major city, massive oil spills, and a

worldwide population explosion that some believe threatens to exhaust the most elemental natural resources required for human survival. As the vast scope and severity of these problems become increasingly clear, even those who have historically been hostile to the claims of environmentalists have become sympathetic to at least some of these concerns.

The increased severity and awareness of environmental problems have also heightened attention to questions of moral and political theory. One set of questions, which can be thought of as problems of environmental ethics, has to do with the appropriate relationship between people and the natural world. For example, should humans think of the natural world as a body of resources for their own use, or should nature (or perhaps certain elements of it) be regarded as having value equal to and independent of humans? Another set of questions centers on the relationship between political and environmental values; these are questions of political theory. For example, should justice among humans take priority over respect for nature? Can we think of rights as extending to nonhuman entities, and if so, how do they compare in importance to the rights held by citizens? Is political democracy of greater value than appropriate environmental policy, or vice versa?

These issues have received a great deal of attention in American environmentalist writing during the last two or three decades and have generated significant and heated debates. In the literature on environmental ethics, for example, there is an ongoing debate between biocentric theorists, who argue that the interests of nonhuman beings (and perhaps of the biosphere generally) are as important as human interests, and anthropocentric theorists, who argue that human interests are more important than any interests or needs that may be found in the natural world. In the realm of political philosophy, environmental theorists have debated whether democratic decision making is the appropriate way to create environmental policy. The recommendations given in answer to this question have ranged from outright authoritarianism to radical participatory democracy.

Although questions concerning environmentalism and political theory have drawn less attention than questions of environmental ethics they are probably more significant. Environmental problems are collective problems, in both their cause and effect, and they are thus political problems at their core. In addition, these problems pose direct and radical challenges to contemporary political theory. For example, democratic theory has traditionally been premised on assumptions of expanding wealth and abundance.[2] Such assumptions, however, have been called into question by environmentalist concerns about the "limits to growth" and the depletion of natural resources. In addition, some writers have claimed that democratic politics has itself generated anti-environmentalist social behavior and public policy[3] or at the very least is incapable of contending with the enormous problems created by increasingly scarce resources.[4] Contemporary political theory is being forced to face the challenges raised by environmental problems, which threaten some of this theory's most cherished (and frequently unexamined) assumptions and values. As Marc Landy, Marc Roberts, and Stephen Thomas write, "Our relationship with the environment raises fundamental issues about who we are and what we care about."[5]

The challenge of thinking about these issues has been taken up by those writers who have addressed the relationship between environmentalism and political theory. As a result of the historically unique character of many contemporary environmental problems, much of this political theory is charting relatively new territory. Interest in the physical and natural world is not unknown in political theory—indeed, theorists from Plato to Rousseau to Jefferson have all commented on the relationship of politics to nature, geography, and other aspects of the physical environment. But never before has consideration of these issues been so urgent or so central to the tasks of political theory, so crucial to the foundations of the theories themselves. Environmental political theory is important not only because of its timeliness, but also because of the degree to which it must confront old assumptions and develop fresh perspectives as it attempts to integrate new understandings of nature into a theory of politics.

Environmental political theory may address new substantive issues, but it is not unrelated to previous political discourse. American environmental political thinking falls fairly neatly within two well-established traditions of American political thought—what I will refer to as the pastoral and the progressive—and builds its theories, more or less self-consciously, within these traditions. Leo Marx ends his classic study of American literature, *The Machine in the Garden*, by observ-

ing that the tension between the pastoral and the machine is the "root conflict of our culture."[6] If we think of the pastoral as representing simple village and rural agricultural life, and the machine as symbolizing advancing technology, industrialization, modern science, and the wholesale engineering of the environment, Marx's claim strengthens our grasp of these two fundamental strains of American environmental political thought. The pastoral tradition, whose central figure is Henry David Thoreau, rebels against commercial and industrial society and calls for the simplification of life, tutored and informed by an appreciation and understanding of nature. The progressive tradition, whose central figure is Gifford Pinchot, emphasizes the wise technical administration of natural resources for the enhancement of material life and the support of distributive justice. The contrast between these two theorists and the traditions they represent has been frequently discussed. What is less frequently appreciated is the degree to which the positions of Thoreau and Pinchot represent not only competing environmental theories, but competing political theories as well.

Perhaps the most widely quoted statements from Thoreau's writings in the environmentalist literature come from one of his last essays, "Walking," where he claims that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World."[7] Elsewhere in this essay Thoreau writes, "Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him."[8] These and similar sentiments, scattered throughout Thoreau's texts, are used by environmentalists to illustrate Thoreau's commitment to wilderness preservation and his belief that wilderness can inspire both individuals and civilization as a whole.

There is no doubt that Thoreau does advocate both wilderness preservation and its special ability to inspire. In *The Maine Woods*, for example, Thoreau argues for the establishment of national forests, which should be left in their natural state:

> The kings of England formerly had their forests "to hold the king's game," for sport or food, sometimes destroying villages to create or extend them; and I think that they were impelled by a true instinct. Why should not we, who have renounced the king's authority, have our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be "civilized off the face of the earth,"—not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true re-creation? or shall we, like villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains?[9]

For Thoreau, pristine wilderness has some essential qualities that must be protected both for and from civilization, qualities necessary for our "inspiration" as well as our "re-creation."

In "Walking," Thoreau elaborates on his claim that civilization requires the lessons provided by wild nature:

> The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were.[10]

While it is clear from this passage that Thoreau believes wild nature is the foundation of a dynamic civilization, the precise quality of this role is quite obscure. It is tempting to read this paragraph as praise for those empires and nations that have "risen to eminence" through military and political power, but Thoreau's other writings (for example, the famous opening lines of "Civil Disobedience") testify to his great scorn for such empires and conventional political affairs. The most we can infer from this passage is that Thoreau believes that wild forests provide vigor and valuable resources to people and civilizations and that civilizations with the deepest roots in such wild forests are the most vibrant and healthy.

Thoreau's claim that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World," therefore, raises two questions about his meaning here and elsewhere

in his writings. First, how does Thoreau define "wildness?" What image of the natural world does he have in mind when he suggests the importance of wildness? Second, what does Thoreau mean when he claims that this wildness will "preserve" the world? Both questions require an answer if we are to understand Thoreau's pastoral environmentalism and the role it plays in his criticism of American politics and society.

Although Thoreau urges the protection of wild and uncivilized places, this is not the sum total of his thinking. When he first went to Maine in 1846, Thoreau was disturbed and uncomfortable with the wilderness there. "Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. . . . It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we."[11] It was important to preserve some land such as this—land that, as Roderick Nash says, "shocked" Thoreau[12]—but nature had other incarnations that were ultimately of much greater importance to Thoreau than untouched wilderness.

When Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that "we need the tonic of wildness" and "we can never have enough of Nature,"[13] he was living in a very different environment from the wilds of Maine. Walden Pond, of course, was surrounded by cultivated land and near a village. Situated between the civilization of Concord and the wilderness beyond, it was to this pastoral space that Thoreau was most drawn. Nash is correct, I think, when he concludes: "For an optimum existence Thoreau believed, one should alternate between wilderness and civilization, or, if necessary, choose for a permanent residence 'partially cultivated country.' The essential requirement was to maintain contact with both ends of the spectrum."[14] Thoreau was a pastoralist, not a primitivist. Although he was attracted to the wild and uncultivated, he was also somewhat alienated from nature in this pure form.[15]

That Walden was the pastoral setting in which Thoreau was most at home can be illustrated by Thoreau's comments about Native Americans. There are many passages in his writings that suggest that Thoreau considered the Indians as role models; and given Thoreau's understanding of Native American life and culture, emphasizing only these sections might support a primitivist reading of his views.[16] For example, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he praises the

relationship of Indians to their natural environment: "The Indian's intercourse with Nature is at least such as admits of the greatest independence of each."[17] Elsewhere he refers to his desire to cultivate "Indian wisdom,"[18] and he certainly admires the way in which Native Americans lived in balance with nature. Nonetheless, Thoreau was firmly committed to what he called "civilization," by which he meant European civilization. In "Walking," Thoreau contrasts the Indian with the white farmer. "I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural."[19] The farmer is not only perhaps more natural—in Thoreau's sense—than the Indian, but also provides Thoreau with a heroic symbol:

> The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories, which should be handed down as heirlooms from father to son, are not the sword and the lance, but the bushwack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field. The very winds blew the Indian's cornfield into the meadow, and pointed out the way which he had not the skill to follow. He had no better implement with which to intrench himself in the land than a clam-shell. But the farmer is armed with plow and spade.[20]

In *Walden*, too, Thoreau asserts that "civilization" is "a real advance in the condition of man" over the life of the "savage," although "only the wise improve their advantages."[21] The most powerful exemplar in Thoreau's writings is not the Native American but John Brown. And Brown is portrayed by Thoreau as the greatest of the Puritans, greater than even the heroes of the Revolution, and, more significantly, as a product of the pastoral American West rather than the overly civilized halls of Harvard University.[22] As he writes in *Walden*, "The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage."[23]

Thoreau's ideal nature, then, was not the uncultivated, but the properly cultivated, not the primitive, but the pastoral and civilized (properly understood). As Wilson Carey McWilliams writes, "Thoreau's quarrel with civilization . . . lay in his charge that civilization was insufficiently civilized."[24] The "wildness" that Thoreau believed

could "preserve" civilization was pastoral, not untamed and primeval.[25]

The more difficult and important question can now be addressed: What does Thoreau see as the moral and redemptive role of nature in the "preservation of the World"? In the opening passages of "A Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau writes, "The merely political aspect of the land is never very cheering; men are degraded when considered as the members of a political organization. . . . In society you will not find health, but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid. Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so."[26] Similar sentiments are expressed in "Walking" when Thoreau contrasts civilization and nature: "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that."[27] In order to provoke the reader into a greater appreciation of the natural world, and our potential relationship to it, Thoreau separates experience into two radically different spheres, civilization and nature. From this iconoclastic position, he speaks as a partisan of the latter against the former. The implication is that nature serves as an alternative to, or a refuge from, society, and each individual must choose between the two. Thoreau's own commitment is clear: "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk."[28]

This stark contrast between society and nature seems to be reinforced by Thoreau's comments about politics in "Civil Disobedience." "I simply wish," he claims, "to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually."[29] In the case of the poll tax that Thoreau was required to pay, however, simple withdrawal from the political world was impossible. Because of the severity of the evils that he believed he would be supporting if he paid the tax—the institution of slavery and an imperialistic war with Mexico—Thoreau felt that he must defy the government. In such a case, the moral individual must let his or her life "be a counter-friction to stop the machine" of the state.[30] This rebellion, however, is only secondarily aimed at political reform. The foremost concern is to prevent the individual from becoming a party to the evil at hand. "What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn."[31] In fact, Thoreau finds the entire confrontation to be tiring and distracting, but he is comforted by the fact that such rebellions are unusual episodes in his otherwise independent, apolitical life: "The government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free . . . unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him."[32]

Thoreau's position in this essay is similar to that in "Walking" and "A Natural History of Massachusetts." At his cabin by Walden Pond, or in other communion with nature, Thoreau is able to concentrate on the serious business of living. Civilization, society, and the state all threaten to intrude upon his solitude and freedom, and they present him with distractions and potentially serious threats to his moral integrity. In "Civil Disobedience," the degree of his alienation from society is indicated by the options he presents regarding his relationship with the state: Withdrawal and rebellion are the only alternatives. There is no indication that conventional participation as a citizen is a possibility for him, and he explicitly refuses to entertain this option. "It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? But in this case the State has provided no way: its very Constitution is the evil."[33] In "Walking," the social relationships of family and friendship represent impediments to be overcome before an individual is ready to experience the natural world; in "Civil Disobedience," the state becomes the impediment.

In these writings, Thoreau seems to suggest that the moral role of nature is the refuge it provides from the mundane and immoral world of ordinary men and women. Nash argues that "the development of Thoreau's wilderness philosophy is most meaningful when juxtaposed to this sense of discontent with his society."[34] Thoreau's radical criticism of American society drove him to nature, where he could

find the truth, solitude, and meaning lacking in nineteenth-century society. "Wilderness," Nash concludes, "was ultimately significant to Thoreau for its beneficial effect on thought."[35]

This conclusion is certainly warranted if we focus on the kind of passages discussed above. There, Thoreau's apparent anarchism and radical individualism lead him to an almost misanthropic rejection of the human world. These elements in Thoreau's writings reflect the most pessimistic moods and moments in his work, where nature is clearly portrayed as an escape from human society. The irony is that the nature to which Thoreau is retreating is a pastoral, cultivated, and peopled nature, which is itself a branch of society.

There is in Thoreau's writings, however, another strain that I believe is more central and important. Nash's reading of Thoreau leads him to conclude that the exclusive role of nature is to provide solace for the thinker, the only comfortable environment for a philosopher in an alien and hostile human world. This reading makes sense if "Civil Disobedience" is thought of as Thoreau's central political work and essays such as "Walking" are viewed as his central works concerning nature. However, Thoreau's most developed considerations of both politics and nature are found in *Walden*. And in *Walden* there is a very different and more hopeful message about politics, the moral importance of nature, and the relationship between the two.

To understand Thoreau's project in *Walden*, it is helpful to consider two themes in his thought that emerge as early as his college years at Harvard. In a brief essay written while he was a student, Thoreau asserts that the "end of life is education."[36] This education, he argues, is best supplied by nature rather than by "art" or civilization. "Nature is continually exerting a moral influence over man, she accommodates herself to the soul of man."[37] It is contact and sympathy with nature that allows the cultivation of true wisdom.

> A nation may be ever so civilized and yet lack wisdom. Wisdom is the result of education, and education being the bringing out, or development, of that which is in a man, by contact with the Not Me, is safer in the hands of Nature than of Art. The savage may be, and often is, a sage. Our Indian is more of a man than an inhabitant of a city. He lives as a man—he thinks as a man—he dies as a man. The latter, it is true, is more learned; learning is Art's creature; but it is not essential to the perfect man—it cannot educate.[38]

The romanticization of the Indian aside, the importance of this early essay is Thoreau's strong claim about the moral impact of nature. Although this statement clashes with other comments he makes in these classroom exercises (he wrote in another essay a month later that "truth is not exalted, but rather degraded and soiled by contact with humanity"[39]), it is clear the young Thoreau believes that nature is both receptive to humans, if they will only be open and sensitive to it, and of the greatest possible moral benefit to them as well.

A second theme from Thoreau's college years appears in his classbook autobiography, where he takes great pride in the revolutionary heritage of his native Concord. "I shall ever pride myself upon the place of my birth—may she never have cause to be ashamed of her sons."[40] It is these two commitments—to both the systematic study of nature as a moral project and the maintenance of the revolutionary tradition of Concord—that are combined and developed as the central ideas of *Walden*.

Thoreau is careful to inform the reader that he retreated to Walden Pond on the Fourth of July 1845, although he claims the date of his move was an "accident."[41] He tells us that he came to Walden Pond to learn from nature,[42] and the overarching theme of the book is the contrast between the lessons that he discovers there and the society he finds around him in Massachusetts. In the contemporary world, he writes, "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments."[43] The nature found at Walden Pond represents the reality that is the key to attacking the superficiality of American society—a superficiality that in turn leads to the misery of lives lived in "quiet desperation."[44] Nature is also the reality that enables Thoreau to condemn what he sees as the corruption of American patriotism. In the conclusion to *Walden*, he writes that "every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who have no *self*-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which

makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads."[45]

Thoreau is not withdrawing from society simply to find personal comfort and respite in nature. Rather, his project is that of the political radical and social critic, and the move to his cabin in the woods gives him the appropriate vantage point from which to criticize the American society that has betrayed whatever was good and noble in its revolutionary tradition. "I delight to come to my bearings—not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may—not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial nineteenth century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by. What are men celebrating?"[46] Thoreau took his bearings from the woods—first, to contemplate those things his society was "celebrating," and then to convey what he learned to his fellow citizens.

Just what is it that Thoreau discovers from this experience with nature? Implicit in these excerpts is perhaps the principal lesson: that nature teaches a different, truer, and more significant moral reality than that found in contemporary society. "We are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most have not delved six feet beneath the surface, nor leaped as many above it. We know not where we are. Besides, we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface."[47] The knowledge found in society is scientific and utilitarian, while the truths found in nature have a deeper essence. In "A Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau writes about the wisdom gained from being open to nature: "We do not learn by inference and deduction and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy. It is with science as with ethics—we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom."[48]

The wisdom acquired from the "direct intercourse and sympathy" with nature is not only an alternative to the methods of knowing and thinking found in commercial society, but stands as a direct challenge to them. Modern science is blindly utilitarian, wedded to the machine, commerce, and material progress. At its extreme, science has

lost touch with its moral basis and thus leads society away from the life taught by nature. In a review of a book by a utopian Fourierist, Thoreau writes, "How little do the most wonderful inventions of modern times detain us. They insult nature." Reflecting the temper of modern society, the "chief fault of this book is, that it aims to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely" and so distracts humankind from the moral task of living good lives.[49] If people were more in sympathy with nature, they would discover that the basic needs of human life are relatively easily provided for: "Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength."[50] This existence would also free them to develop a greater human wisdom than that found in the mere caring for material needs and pleasures.

The aim of this wisdom is not simply to become more "natural," but actually to overcome the sensuality of nature. "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. . . . Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome. What avails it that you are Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself no more, if you are not more religious?"[51] Nature teaches values and wisdom of a higher order than the sensualism and utilitarianism that thrive in commercial society. In nature are found the "higher laws."

A life tutored by these higher laws contrasts with American society in two substantive ways. The first is in simplicity of lifestyle. "Our life is frittered away by detail. . . . Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail."[52] The United States, of course, has taken exactly the opposite course: "The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose."[53] Modern life yields luxury and comfort, and in doing so it creates needless complexity and personal dissatisfaction. In addition to individual alienation, commercial culture produces among citizens an inevitable material inequality, extremes of wealth and indi-

gence.[54] Thoreau, however, has learned from nature to limit himself to simple and more substantial things, "for my greatest skill has been to want but little."[55] With the unhappiness and economic divisions produced by the "incessant business" of contemporary society, a host of unnecessary social conflicts emerge.[56] Thoreau suggests, with characteristic exaggeration, that in a simpler society crime itself would become rare: "I am convinced, that if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown."[57] Nature teaches appropriate human wants, and supplies the means by which they can be satisfied. The symptoms of discord, alienation, and meaningless activity in society are indicative of the degree to which the nation has strayed from the simplicity taught by nature.

The second way nature's instruction differs from the attitude of contemporary society is in a sense of humility and proportion. Consider, for example, Thoreau's discussion of his experience of solitude at Walden: "I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops [of rain], and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since."[58] Thoreau obviously did not cease to think about the "human neighborhood" as a result of this experience; *Walden* itself is testimony against this claim. What Thoreau is suggesting is that solitude in nature allowed him to understand the greater context of the natural world, to see human society in proper perspective. This is also his point when he argues that "we need to witness our own limits transgressed."[59] Human arrogance, illustrated by American society's commitment to luxury and progress, needs to be tempered by the experience of natural limits. To understand the superiority of the natural world and the moral context it provides for human society is to understand the appropriate possibilities for such a society. Because American society has become deaf to the teachings of nature, it struggles incessantly to fashion the world after its own image. Its hubris produces the unhealthy, alienated, restless society Thoreau describes. Americans should learn that "humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights."[60]

To return to our original question, Thoreau believes that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World" because of the potentially educative and moral influence of nature on individuals and, ideally, on society as a whole.[61] In contrast to the flourishing commercial society of nineteenth-century America, nature offers a different way to wisdom than science does, an alternative to the compulsive and alienating world of a market economy, and a context for a society to comprehend its true limitations and thus its true potential. Nature has the potential to tutor not only the philosopher, but also the nation as a whole. It teaches the higher laws to which a genuine American patriot and revolutionary must appeal, and these laws provide the vantage point for criticizing both the superficiality and the downright evils of American society. It is the foundation on which a truer justice can be built. When Thoreau turned to nature, he did so not only to find solitude and comfort in an uncomfortable world, but also to discover the means by which he could judge the values of contemporary society. And although Thoreau never provides a detailed vision of a society wholly driven by the lessons of nature, his work challenges us to think of this as our primary political task.

Gifford Pinchot was the first professional forester in the United States and a central figure in the political affairs of the Progressive period. He was one of Theodore Roosevelt's most trusted and influential advisers, during his presidency as well as the creation of the Bull Moose Party in 1912. In 1896 he was appointed chief of the Forest Commission (later the Forest Service), and he served in that capacity until 1910. He vigorously pursued the scientific management and conservation of U.S. forests, and under his leadership the National Forest system was established. Pinchot is rightly considered the founding giant of twentieth century conservationism and natural resource management, and his views still carry weight today, particularly within the forestry profession. Although he served two terms as governor of Pennsylvania (1923–27; 1931–35), he regarded himself first and foremost as a forester and conservationist, which is apparent throughout his autobiography, *Breaking New Ground*.

There is perhaps no other figure from the Progressive Era who more completely embodies the political values and commitments of this period. Pinchot's writings are full of Rooseveltian "trust-busting" rhetoric—arguments for the public regulation of the economy in order to

maintain economic opportunity for all in the face of threats by concentrated capital and the modern business corporation—and pleas for clean and efficient government backed by a strong ethic of honest bureaucratic public service. All of these elements, commonplace in the writings of the age, find complete, almost stereotypical expression in Pinchot's work.

Pinchot's unique contribution to this period was his commitment to the conservation of natural resources and the degree to which he viewed this as the core of the Progressive agenda. He opens *The Fight for Conservation* with the claim that "the conservation of natural resources is the basis, and the only permanent basis, of national success. There are other conditions, but this one lies at the foundation."[62] American prosperity and liberty are themselves premised on the abundance of nature, and thus any progressive and farsighted political program must begin with the protection of this natural bounty. "The planned and orderly development and conservation of our natural resources is the first duty of the United States."[63]

In his autobiography, Pinchot acknowledges the importance of George Perkins Marsh to the development of his own thinking, referring to Marsh's 1864 *Man and Nature* as an "epoch-making book."[64] The work is indeed remarkable as an early and sophisticated statement of ecological principles that would not become widely discussed and accepted until well into the second half of the twentieth century. Observing the degree to which human society disrupts and transforms natural ecosystems, not only in his native Vermont but worldwide, Marsh concludes that "man is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords."[65] In fact, the degree of destruction of ecosystems caused by the reckless use of natural resources is potentially a menace to civilization and the earth itself. "The earth," Marsh observes, "is fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant, and another era of equal human crime and human improvidence, and of like duration with that through which traces of that crime and the improvidence extended, would reduce it to such a condition of impoverished productiveness, of shattered surface, of climatic excess, as to threaten the depravation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species."[66]

In Marsh's view, the threats to the environment are caused by three factors. First, there is too little understanding of natural processes and the relationships that keep nature in balance. We have been too insensitive to the ways in which "all nature is linked together by invisible bonds."[67] Much more attention must be given to these linkages, and this will only occur by following Marsh's own lead in studying ecological relationships and the human connection to them. "If man is destined to inhabit the earth much longer, and to advance in natural knowledge with the rapidity which has marked his progress in physical science for the last two or three centuries, he will learn to put a wiser estimate on the works of creation, and will derive . . . great instruction from studying the ways of nature in her obscurest, humblest walks."[68] Closer scrutiny of the links between "man and nature" is a prerequisite not only for preventing the future deterioration of nature, but for maintaining human prosperity as well.

Second, the attitude toward the earth that is usually exhibited by civilization must change. "Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste."[69] Marsh scolds society for forgetting that "the command of religion and of practical wisdom" is "to use this world as not abusing it."[70]

Third, Marsh believes that one of the institutions most guilty of flagrant disregard for nature is the modern business corporation. He refers to the "rottenness of private corporations" and attacks them as immoral and corrupt.[71] By pursuing profits with such single-minded disregard for other values, these enterprises pose a potentially disastrous threat to the environment.

Marsh is guardedly optimistic that all of these problems can be overcome. Improving knowledge of and attitudes toward nature can be accomplished through works such as his own. The business corporation can be checked by strict government regulation and control.[72] More generally, as sensitivity toward nature increases, Marsh believes that people can become "coworkers" with nature and reestablish the harmonies that exist spontaneously.[73] A full understanding of ecological processes may be beyond human reach, yet people might come to know enough about such processes to cease being destructive agents.

> The equation of animal and vegetable life is too complicated a problem for human intelligence to solve, and we can never know how wide a circle of disturbance we produce in the harmonies of

> nature when we throw the smallest pebble into the ocean of organic life. This much, however, we seem authorized to conclude: as often as we destroy the balance by deranging the original proportions between different orders of spontaneous life, the law of self preservation requires us to restore the equilibrium.[74]

For example, some resources, such as the forests, can actually provide greater economic benefits through proper management than through wholesale destruction.[75]

There seems to be a measure of humility in Marsh's claims about the human capacity to completely understand and control natural processes, but this element of Marsh's thought drops away almost entirely in Pinchot's work. Like Marsh, Pinchot is alarmed by the reckless waste and destruction of natural resources. But unlike Marsh, Pinchot has unwavering optimism about the possibility of correcting this problem and, in fact, managing natural resources so as to allow for an almost endlessly increasing American prosperity. "The object of practical forestry is precisely to make the forest render its best service to man in such a way as to increase rather than to diminish its usefulness in the future."[76] Pinchot agreed with Marsh about the dangers of unregulated exploitation of nature, and he acted on Marsh's claim that natural resources must be protected and managed in the long-term public interest. In fact, as Stephen Fox has written, "in his own person Pinchot embodied the transition from amateur protection to scientific management" of natural resources.[77]

Samuel Hays, in his distinguished historical study of progressive conservationism, argues that it was a political movement fundamentally scientific and technocratic in character. Hays notes that "conservation, above all, was a scientific movement, and its role in history arises from the implications of science and technology in modern society. . . . Its essence was rational planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources. . . . It is from the vantage point of applied science, rather than of democratic protest, that one must understand the historic role of the conservation movement."[78] The evidence for viewing Pinchot in this light is certainly great. In all of Pinchot's writings on conservation and forestry, the emphasis is the same as in his opening sentence of *A Primer of Forestry*: "The object of forestry is to discover and apply the principles according to which forests are best managed."[79] Elsewhere he refers to forestry as "tree farming" and to the forest as "strictly . . . a factory of wood," and for him the task is to manage these forests for "continuous production."[80] Thus, efficiency and productivity become the highest values to be pursued, and these are achieved through the same type of scientific management that was currently being developed in industrial production. The key to success, therefore, rested with the training and employment of dedicated public servants like himself, who understood both the economy and the ecology of natural resources.

Despite these scientific and administrative elements, however, it would be a mistake to label Pinchot as simply an apolitical technocrat and to think of his view of conservation as managerial only. At the heart of his conservationism is a commitment to a particular understanding of democratic equality and liberty, which is synthesized in his conception of equality of opportunity.

> I stand for the Roosevelt policies because they set the common good of all of us above the private gain of some of us; because they recognize the livelihood of the small man as more important to the Nation than the profit of the big man; because they oppose all useless waste at present at the cost of robbing the future; because they demand the complete, sane, and orderly development of all our natural resources; because they insist upon equality of opportunity and denounce monopoly and special privilege; . . . and, most of all, because in them the plain American always and everywhere holds the first place.[81]

For Pinchot, the conservation of natural resources is of fundamental democratic value because it allows for the possibility of equality of opportunity for all citizens. Such equality is defined not so much as access to political participation or power than as access to at least a minimal level of material comfort and prosperity. "The single object of the public land system of the United States . . . is the making and maintenance of prosperous homes."[82] Liberty, in turn, is thought of by Pinchot as the ability to pursue and enjoy this material equality. Dwight Waldo's observation about the political commitments of twentieth-century American public administration could have been directed specifically at Pinchot: "Students of administration, it is clear, are in-

clined to a large, if indefinite, degree of equality—at least in the enjoyment of material things. Equality is probably the chief ingredient of their sense of justice. . . . Writers on public administration have less frequently spoken in terms of liberty, not because they regard it as less important than equality, but because they find the essence of liberty to lie in equality itself."[83] For Pinchot, as well as for the broader tradition of public administration that grew out of the Progressive Era, democratic liberty and equality are primarily problems of material comfort and individual utility. "Conservation is a moral issue because it involves the rights and duties of our people—their rights to prosperity and happiness, and their duties to themselves, to their descendents, and to the whole future progress and welfare of this nation."[84] It is in this sense that Pinchot regards conservation as a fundamentally democratic movement, and he never lost sight of this Progressive vision.

Pinchot's "fight for conservation," then, was actually a fight to protect equality of opportunity for the "plain" citizen from the privilege of wealth and corporate power. "Equality of opportunity is the real object of our laws and institutions,"[85] and there are no laws and institutions of greater importance for achieving this goal than those concerned with the conservation of natural resources. Given this underlying political purpose, it is clear that Grant McConnell has captured better than Samuel Hays the essential qualities of early conservationism. As he observes, "To an important degree . . . the conservation movement of the first part of the century was Progressivism itself . . . it was the realization in political form of a delusively simple idea, that of equality."[86] Scientific management is the means, but democratic equality is the end, of Pinchot's conservationism.

This commitment to democratic equality informs what Pinchot outlines as the three principles of conservation. First, conservation is dedicated to "development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now." The second principle is the prevention of unnecessary waste. Third, "natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of the many, and not merely for the profit of the few."[87] Pinchot thus views nature in utilitarian terms, but utility is defined by Pinchot's commitment to distributive justice, which, in turn, is essential for political equality. "Conservation," he writes, "is the most democratic movement this country has known for a generation."[88]

Pinchot believes that conservation provides not only the means by which the prosperity of a democratic order is maintained and promoted, but also a guide for a new ethic of public service. "The opportunity to set a new standard in political morality is here now."[89] Although there has been and continues to be an "unholy alliance" between business and government in American politics,[90] the standard set by his own Forest Service in the management of the nation's affairs offers a new model for democratic government. "The national housekeeping, the Government's vast machinery, should be the cleanest, the most effective, and the best in methods and in men, for its touch upon the life of the Nation at every point is constant and vital."[91] Efficient management goes hand in hand with the development of high standards of honest, professional bureaucratic responsibility.

Yet the goal of clean, efficient, nonpartisan government service can collide with the utilitarian sensibilities that Pinchot articulates as the guiding principles of conservation. On the one hand, Pinchot defends a patriotic vision of public service aimed at the public good rather than personal considerations of material gain and loss.[92] On the other, he presents a program of forestry premised on economic benefits. In the opening pages of *Breaking New Ground*, Pinchot relates the advice given to him when he was a student of scientific forestry in Europe after his graduation from Yale. One of his teachers in France instructed him to go home to America and "manage a forest and make it pay."[93] Pinchot was very proud of his first success at this task, managing the forest on George W. Vanderbilt's Biltmore estate in North Carolina. The conclusion Pinchot draws from this experience is that "in the long run forestry cannot succeed unless the people who live in and near the forest are for it and not against it."[94] In order to convince these people, it is essential to demonstrate that forest conservation is not only good for the forest, but good for business as well.

Pinchot does not appear to be uncomfortable with the fact that he appeals to two separate, and perhaps at times incompatible, sets of values. Public servants are to be motivated by high patriotic ideals, while they are to use the market as the incentive for society to support their policies. Pinchot is confident that the two goals can be synthesized—that forests can be managed economically and ecologically,

and that public servants will not become corrupted by the market values they employ to promote their policies.[95]

A related tension is found in the attitude that Pinchot advocates toward nature generally. Pinchot appears to be somewhat ambivalent about his utilitarianism, but in the end he considers his position practical and even brave. Contrasting his own work with that of early protesters against the rapaciousness of the lumber industry, Pinchot writes, "Their eyes were closed to the economic motive behind true Forestry. They hated to see a tree cut down. So do I, and the chances are that you do too. But you cannot practice Forestry without it. Naturally the lumber juggernaut rolled over them—rolled over them and went on its forest-devastating and home-building way without even paying them the tribute of serious attention."[96] Pinchot here recognizes that there may be other values in the forest than simple economic ones; trees may be prized for some quality besides their usefulness as lumber, and he clearly is sympathetic, on a personal level, to this sensibility. In fact, when one reads through the stories that Pinchot tells of his travels and experiences in the nation's forests, it is apparent that he found a great deal of intrinsic and aesthetic value in the natural world. Nonetheless, there is no place for these sentiments in the context of the political and economic realities of American life. Referring to those who resisted the "lumber juggernaut" as "denudatics," he says, "I could not join the denudatics, because they were marching up a blind alley."[97] He, in contrast, is going to blaze new ground, which actually takes a good deal more imagination and courage than simple moral outrage or protest. "The job was not to stop the ax, but to regulate its use."[98] The denudatics are as guilty as the lumber industry of not looking to the future and developing a workable political plan to handle current and future needs for natural resources. Pinchot's utilitarian attitude toward natural resources was a strategic choice, made to assure the political viability of conservation. But it required the adoption of an economic view of nature and the acceptance of the primacy of economic values in American life.

Although Pinchot is at great pains to present "the fight for conservation" as the foundation of a new sensibility toward both the nation's natural resources and democratic public service, in the end he is forced to cater to, rather than challenge, the values that gave rise to

the exploitation of the forests, and nature generally, in the first instance. Pinchot does not find this to be an unsatisfactory compromise because he believes that if natural resources are properly managed, there is no reason to fear for either the continued abundance of American society or the health of the natural world. The threat to natural resources comes from a lack of, or poor, public regulation. If, however, public management is honest, efficient, and well informed, American prosperity as well as environmental integrity will be assured. Thus, Pinchot is never forced to confront any conflict between the needs of the natural environment and his own values of scientific management, patriotic public service, and utilitarian materialism. In his view, a stark choice between American materialism and the protection of nature can be avoided by using the tools of scientific management. His utilitarian conservationism is a compromise that allows for both abundance and the safeguarding of nature.

Pinchot's view of nature, then, has a number of crucial characteristics. First, nature exists primarily for the sake of human prosperity. Humanity's privileged position, however, entails great responsibility: "The first duty of the human race is to control the earth it lives upon."[99] The purpose of the conservation movement is to establish the principles and institutions necessary for this duty. "The great fundamental problem which confronts us all now is this: Shall we continue, as a Nation, to exist in well-being? That is the conservation problem."[100] Since nature exists for the sake of human welfare, the protection of nature is required less because of its intrinsic value than because of moral obligations we owe to ourselves, our fellows, and future citizens. This entire vision is built on a political program that holds nature and natural resources to be fundamentally important for achieving the goals of political equality and liberty. "The conservation of political liberty will take its proper place alongside the conservation of the means of living."[101] Pinchot's genius and political success lay in the manner in which he wedded his concern for nature to his belief and participation in Progressive politics.

The contrasts between Thoreau and Pinchot are striking and obvious. Thoreau was a rebel, an outsider, and one of the most forceful and (over time) influential critics of American society. Pinchot was a classic

political insider, a reformer as well as a champion and defender of his society. Thoreau's most profound writings about nature were produced when he retreated to the periphery of American society, while Pinchot's work grew out of a lifetime of public service and intimate contact with political power.

Thoreau's pastoral environmentalism has a crucial and often overlooked political core. Certainly he looked to nature as the source of intellectual inspiration and personal satisfaction in a banal, crude, and immoral world. But beyond this, he found that nature provided him with the means to criticize American politics and society and to imagine a more just political order. In nature, he believed, a person experiences the independence and the humility that are necessary for building and sustaining a moral, free, and democratic community. It was his pastoral environmental political theory that informed his censure of his fellow citizens ("O for a man who is a *man*, and, as my neighbor says, has a bone in his back which you cannot pass your hand through!"[102]) as well as his praise for the simple town-meeting democracy of farmer and villager, which compared so favorably to the corruption of city and national politics: "When, in some obscure country town, the farmers come together to a special town meeting, to express their opinion on some subject which is vexing the land, that, I think, is the true Congress, and the most respectable one that is ever assembled in the United States."[103] Nature supplied Thoreau with the principles he needed to ground both his social criticism and his vision of a more equitable America. For this better nation to exist, people must listen to the lessons of nature rather than the clattering of commercial society.

Pinchot, no less than Thoreau, viewed nature from an essentially political perspective, but there the similarity between the two men ends. For Thoreau, nature provided values essential to the criticism of a potentially just but presently corrupt society; for Pinchot, nature furnished the material resources needed to sustain an already basically just political order. While he disapproved of the excesses of American capitalism and feared its corrupting influence on government, he nonetheless believed there were viable solutions: The threats to natural resources could be alleviated through scientific management, and the dangers of political abuses could be controlled through the elimination of corruption and the patriotic appeal to conventional American values as a guide for public servants. What for Thoreau was the latent moral and spiritual foundation of American society was for Pinchot its material base and resource.

Thoreau's pastoralism was politically radical, but it was also politically weak—the result of its radicalism and Thoreau's chosen position as an outsider in American society. He inspired no political movement, nor did he wish to do so (at least in any ordinary sense). Pinchot's progressive conservationism was politically influential largely because of its linkage to traditional and widely held political values. The weakness of Thoreau's overall political clout reflects the strength and power of his radical criticism; his appeal to nature is a direct challenge to conventional American values. The broad political popularity of Pinchot's conservationism, on the other hand, reflects the success with which he tied his material and instrumental concept of nature to democratic politics and a particular democratic vision.

As mentioned at the outset, many current discussions of environmentalism tend to divide the contemporary literature into two opposing camps, the anthropocentric and the biocentric. To the former, environmental values are ultimately grounded in concerns about human goods and interests, and so environmental protection, conservation, and even wilderness preservation are justified in terms of their importance for human welfare. To the latter, there are intrinsic values in at least some aspects of the natural world that are independent of human goods—and perhaps of even greater importance than human welfare—and these elements must be protected and respected for their own sake.

This environmental ethics debate is not very useful for understanding the origins of American environmental political thought. It would be possible, for example, to regard Thoreau as biocentric, and Pinchot as anthropocentric. Although there are certainly biocentric messages in Thoreau's nature writings, on the whole the emphasis is on the educative benefits of nature for human welfare. As Bill McKibben observes, "It is curious . . . just how little description of nature *Walden* contains."[104] Likewise, Pinchot developed strongly anthropocentric arguments to support his program of conservation. Yet he also appears to have been personally sensitive to the intrinsic goods of nature. Nash in fact writes that Pinchot "selected forestry as a career because

it involved contact with the outdoors," which he cherished throughout his life.[105]

The current debate between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, therefore, misses the crucial issues at stake between these two theorists. Ultimately, Thoreau's pastoralism and Pinchot's progressivism do not part company over the appropriate conception of nature abstractly considered, but rather over the appropriate understanding of American political life and values and the role of nature in this political life. If the political element in their thought is ignored, much of the moral and intellectual power of their respective visions is lost. If we remove the social and political criticism from Thoreau's writings about nature, we are left only with an alienated naturalist—and we will fail to grasp what initially drove Thoreau to Walden Pond. If we remove the vision of Progressive democracy from Pinchot's work, we are left merely with the scientific management and control of natural resources for no other purpose than brute human survival—a much lower aim than the commitment to democratic equality that actually animates his writings. The importance of Thoreau and Pinchot for understanding American environmental thought is that for both theorists, environmental thought was essentially political thought. As such, their works represent two competing paradigms—the pastoral and the progressive—for American environmental political theory.

2

Scarcity beyond Inefficiency: Neo-Malthusian Fears

> You will see how dearly nature makes us pay for the contempt with which we have treated her lessons.
>
> —*J. J. Rousseau*

Gifford Pinchot's progressive conservationism was based on a crucial technical claim: Natural resources, if properly managed, are for all practical purposes limitless. The threats posed to nature by contemporary society, and the possible scarcity of resources that could result from these threats, are caused by needless waste, poor administration, and the squandering of natural resources for short-sighted private gain. Scientific public management would assure in perpetuity the availability of the resources required for an expanding economy and a liberal democratic society.

Pinchot's optimistic views about the abundance of natural resources provided him with the link between scientific management and democratic politics. Not only would public management produce the necessary material basis of democratic society, but it would actually promote democratic values by setting an example of patriotic public service. As Grant McConnell has pointed out, however, the mass appeal of Pinchot's conservationism died with the end of Progressive politics. The popularity of the program had hinged on its championship of democratic equality, but that banner now shifted to other movements (particularly the labor movement).[1] (Even so, Pinchot's views have remained influential within the professional ranks of public servants and foresters, primarily in the doctrine of multiple use for public lands.[2])

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, nagging concerns began to emerge about the increasing severity and intractability of problems of