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A friend of mine who taught English in Japan relates the opposite extreme. The first time she asked a student, "What do you think?" she expected the reply, "I think. . . ." It surprised her when the student turned to consult classmates and then reported their collective findings: "We think. . . ."

demands placed on us by others' lives. as we are free from restrictive political measures and free from perverse assumption that we can happily "go it alone" so long not imposed upon by external authority. There is a facile and believe this. To be free in the United States is to be left alone, think we exist separately because we have been socialized to that takes an especially extreme form in the United States. We of this individualism is that it is a cultural phenomenon—one roundings, like sacks of skin or disembodied minds. The irony We think and act as though we're separate from our sur-

Should we take his remarks at face value? Is he motivated exclusively, or even primarily, by a selfish thirst for pleasure? Perhaps he was responding not solely to his yearning for subjective delight but to a larger situation in which others' lives are interwoven with his own. In that case, our individualistic language doesn't provide him the means to tell the whole story.

It's crucial to guard individual creativity from being thwarted by an over-organized social environment, like *Star Trek's* "Borg" collective. But it's equally pressing to construct new conceptions of individuality and freedom in touch with the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary life. Consider that the world's human population was 1.7 billion in 1900. Today it is six billion. By 2050, the United Nations estimates it could skyrocket as high as 11.2 billion! Family planning aside, we urgently need greater cooperation. Genuine freedom lies neither in throwing off the yoke of social life nor in stoic resignation to it. Irony as it may seem, we are most free when we welcome shared experience as something desirable and set ourselves to imaginatively tap its potential.

Our cultivation of obtuse egos has become appallingly destructive. John Dewey lamented over eighty years ago that such individualism leads to

*In a December 1999 news broadcast, a man in his thirties was interviewed as he sifted through some of the thousands of "Dear Santa" letters that the Chicago post office receives annually. Each year, he explained, he takes gifts to a few impoverished children who write letters. Asked about his motives, this obviously caring person replied, "Because it makes me feel good inside, so it's like a gift to myself."*

**BY STEVEN FESWIRE**

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**Ecological Humanism**  
**a Moral Image**  
**for Our**  
**Emotive Culture**

Perhaps what is called for is a sort of moral artistry, more analogous to an improvising musician than to a calculating accountant (Utilitarianism's preferred metaphor). At our moral best, we skillfully extemporize in response to each other with the aim of harmonizing interests. But coordinated improvisation is difficult. Jazz pianist Bill Evans discusses the challenge of group improvisation on new material, saying of his collaboration with Miles Davis: "Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social, need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result." An improvisational musician takes up the part of others by catching a cadence from the group's signals while anticipating the group's response to her or his own signals.

We need to get refocused on this sort of engaged intelligence, but extreme individualism (along with much that passes for ethical theory) hampers us. What's required is a better "moral image of the world," to borrow a phrase from philosopher Hilary Putnam. That is, we need a more apt and trustworthy metaphor—or, better yet, myriad complementary metaphors—for organizing our moral lives.

In this spirit, let me highlight some alternatives to individualistic moral images. Bear in mind there's no single "right" metaphor for the self/world relation. Still, as linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson point out, metaphors are more than rhetorical flourishes; different metaphors open up different possibilities and connections.

Similar insights led philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre to lament that we live in an "emotivist culture" where value judgments are boiled down to "nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling." The long and short of this is that many of us carry an implicit assumption—betrayed in behaviors if not paraded in professed beliefs—that moral choices are fundamentally arbitrary and subjective. If so, moral outlooks are simply one person's opinion against another's. Most religious justifications are on no better footing, since they terminate in unexamined faith commitments that make further discussion pointless in the face of competing advocacies.

There's a prevailing myth in the ethics industry that the only

## Moral Images

One of the most interesting studies of individualism is *Habits of the Heart* by Bellah and his colleagues. The authors found that people in the United States tend to have little sense of the "whys" of conduct; why they live their lives as they do, make the choices they make, and hold a specific set of values to be worthwhile. For example, probed for a justification of his recent shift in priorities from career to family, one person replied, "I just find that I get more personal satisfaction from choosing course B over course A. It makes me feel better about myself."

Our extreme individualism bears much responsibility for this. Since our interrelations with each other (and with nature) are concealed, it's not surprising we have a hard time making sense of moral commitments. Our "habits of the heart"—inherited ways of thinking about ourselves and our relationships—are out of harmony with the demands of associated life. Similar insights led philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre to lament that we live in an "emotivist culture" where value judgments are boiled down to "nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling." The long and short of this is that many of us carry an implicit assumption—betrayed in behaviors if not paraded in professed beliefs—that moral choices are fundamentally arbitrary and subjective. If so, moral outlooks are simply one person's opinion against another's. Most religious justifications are on no better footing, since they terminate in unexamined faith commitments that make further discussion pointless in the face of competing advocacies.

The most critical question is how can we give interdependence— which is so obvious in connection with everything we do—a moral meaning? . . . We don't like the fact that we depend on a lot of other people, or that what people do in other parts of the world can have effects on our lives.

Bellah replied:  
When asked in an interview what inescapable question faces us in the twenty-first century, sociologist Robert

## Our Emotive Culture

There is, in John Steinbeck's words, "a failure here that topples all our success." It is a failure to cultivate habits of interworking, of coordinated development, of acting in concert.

part of the remediable suffering of the world.

**Principles are helpful summaries of past moral experiments, but letting them dictate behavior saps our ability to respond intelligently to unique situations that cannot fit prefabricated rules.**

way to avoid this chaos is to identify a supreme moral principle. But the quest for an all-encompassing governing principle is misguided. Much medieval scholasticism, criticized by Francis Bacon for its "cobwebs of learning." Like spiders spinning intricate webs from their own innards, ethicists spin out minutely detailed rules from within a system. Better to emulate a honey bee, says Bacon, turning to life experience for the raw materials of a more fruitful, transformative labor. The absence of respect for ordinary experience is a reason most share Henry David Thoreau's perception of philosophers as builders of conceptual castles that nowhere touch the Earth.

to its logical extreme when he said, "If Heaven is our country, what is the Earth but a place of exile?" On the other hand, to say we are of and about the world implies there is no transcendent basis for the soul and substance of life. To err is human; to forgive, equally human. Our moral deliberations lose their efficacy if we ignore this.

McDermott contrasts the standard container metaphor with a richer image that complements those already discussed:

Let us consider ourselves as being in a uterine situation, which binds us to nutrition in a distinctively organic way. . . . We are floating, gestating organisms, transacting with our environment, eating all the while. The crucial ingredient in all uterine situations is the nutritional quality of the environment. If our immediate surroundings are foul, soiled, polluted harbors of disease and grime, ridden with alien organisms, then we falter and perish.

Just as gestating organisms must be nourished to survive, a nurturing natural and social environment is required for human well-being. If substances are nutritious, a healthy trans-action ensues—no universal mind or metaphysical monarch is required. In a virulent environment, it is as difficult to avoid starvation or poisoning (physical or moral) as it is for a crack baby to avoid her or his mother's toxins.

A mythical individual is contained by, but not organically unified with, the world. The person must concede that his or her body is connected with the environment. But underneath all that she or he is, the person believes there is a rational ego, mind, or soul—a nugget existing autonomously. Since other egos inevitably bump up against the person, he or she may make strategic sacrifices for a social contract securing both his

or her person and property from intrusions. The person may also advocate rigid moral rules to govern humanity because of a supposition that humans are so insulated from each other that caring commitments aren't par-for-the-course. But identity isn't wrapped up with environment any more than a jelly bean is related to its jar.

Admittedly, self-in-inert-container metaphors don't necessarily preclude cooperation. For example, as "shipmates on the life raft Earth" it makes no sense to say when discovering a leak that "it's on your side." Still, this is compatible with self-interested egos which are obliged by their shared peril to cooperate. Beyond the peril, the passengers aren't connected to each other or to their raft any more than a coin to a pocket.

**Supernatural religions are poor resources for constructing socially responsible, experimentally plausible, and ecologically sensitive moral images.**

Ecosystemic thinking is best accommodated and developed within the context of naturalistic humanism. Supernatural religions, in contrast, are poor resources for constructing socially responsible, experimentally plausible, and ecologically sensitive moral images. "Be in the world," Christianly commands, "not of it." Coupled with its theological apparatus, this offers a powerful moral image. An emotional balm for hundreds of millions, it has rallied flagging consciences back to the well of consecrated values. But it's a problematic image. To begin with, it is wrapped up with faith in a nonnatural spring for values, external to terrestrial life, and peculiarly revealed. Homage to this has diverted energy away from improving worldly life and channeled it into rationalization of priestly doctrines. Values pretending to be "not of this world" are quarantined from critical scrutiny and our moral imaginations are left to atrophy.

The Christian command also slights the fact that we are already in, of, and about the world. It conceives of us as items in containers (souls in bodies in a material world). Philosopher John McDermott observes: "Traditionally, we think of ourselves as 'in the world,' as a button is in a box, a marble in a hole, a coin in a pocket, a spoon in a drawer." The marble or coin may be in its container while of and about extraneous things. A coin is of and about economic transactions and isn't integrally related to the pocket containing it. The coin is "in the pocket but not of it."

Likewise, to be in the world but not of it means our lives are properly oriented toward a spiritual realm more weighty and real than mere earthly happenings. Like the coin, in a Christian view, we *ultimately* have our being and value independent of where we temporarily happen to be sheltered. John Calvin took

as improvising musicians cannot simply impose rhythms or tones on the rest of the group, in our moral behavior we must be richly responsive to each other. Jazz musician and poet Michael Harper sums it up nicely: "It's a matter of waiting for an opening rather than just rushing into what's happening." And in jazz, as in morality, the tradition of the art form structures group improvisation while being remade through innovation. As philosopher and classicist Martha Nussbaum says, the jazz player "should be more responsible than the score reader, and not less, to the unfolding continuities and structures of the work."

A complementary moral image can be drawn from the ecological sciences. *Ecology* (from the Greek *oikos*, meaning "household") is the study of our home in the broadest sense. An ecological or "ecosystemic" approach highlights that we function only as integral parts of larger natural, cultural, and interpersonal systems. Individual organisms—whether rainbow trout, spotted owl, or human—may initially appear to be self-sufficient, but study reveals they are situated in webs of inter-dependence. In a nutshell: the "moral" of this is that we must learn how to manage our household better.

**Ecological Humanism**

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these simple insights finally resolve heated debates in environ-  
mental philosophy about whether "value" is human centered.  
But minimally we must reexamine the anti-ecological thinking  
reflected in many of our metaphors for nature, such as those  
noted by George Lakoff in *Moral Politics*: a resource for immedi-  
ate consumption, a foe to be conquered, property to be owned  
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James Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis," which views nature as a  
superorganism to be revered. The doctrine that nature is (non-  
metaphorically) a living organism with an all-enveloping pur-  
pose is experimentally suspect. Still, Gaia theorists and other  
mystically inclined folks do share a pivotal insight with ecologi-  
cal humanism: nature isn't an alien and hostile adversary set  
over and against us.  
"Man did not weave the web of life," runs a popular poem  
inspired by Chief Seattle. "He is merely a strand in it. Whatever  
he does to the web, he does to himself." Compare this to  
remarks by the chief engineer of an interstate highway recently  
completed through the Appalachians: "Those mountains have  
stood in the way of progress for far too long!"  
Steven Fesmire is a professor of philosophy at East Tennessee State  
University. He can be reached by e-mail at [fesmires@etsu.edu](mailto:fesmires@etsu.edu).

### On Nature

The gestation metaphor is richer. Since a self-aware ges-  
tating organism is unified with its environment, it would be  
incoherent for it to ignore that environment. Furthermore—to  
tweak the metaphor a bit—the organism is part of the environ-  
ment in which others are gestating and therefore is depended  
on as well as dependent upon. The organism identifies itself  
with the welfare of its natural and social environments not  
because it makes it feel good inside or because a deity wills it  
but because, lacking this, interactions are noxious.  
There's no metaphysical caste system in which humans have a  
superior status. Human beings, consciousness and all, are out-  
croppings of nature. Benedict Spinoza wasn't too wide of the  
mark: we're simultaneously nature *naturans* and nature *natura*.  
*Nature* (from the Latin *nasci*, meaning "to be born") is more a  
womb in which we gestate than a divine creation to be subdued,  
more a home to be sustained than a resource to be exploited.  
These insights need not lead us to yet another supreme  
moral principle, such as that of Aldo Leopold, who in *A Sand*  
*County Almanac* compellingly argued: "A thing is right when  
it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the  
biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Nor do