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Farming as Philosophy

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Abstract

Agriculture is a petri dish in which we can examine and bring to light a culture's understanding of the human, and of nature. The agricultural enterprise expresses a whole way of being human; reflectively or not, it expresses an understanding of what human beings should or could do in the world, assumptions we can broadly describe as metaphysical. The material questions about how we obtain our food reflect and reproduce our more-than-physical understandings of nature and the human. When we ask how we should farm, we cannot evade the issue of what we think human life should look like. The paper argues that an agricultural future worthy of human beings needs a metaphysics which takes human earthliness seriously but does not absolutise it. In turn, a consideration of agriculture pushes us to reconcile ourselves to the human condition: a condition of ambivalence and fracturedness, as well as fellowship and belonging. Accepting that agriculture puts us at a definitive distance from 'nature' and reveals to us, whether we like it or not, something of our un-naturalness, is the condition for making a meaningful critique of current industrial norms.

Keywords

Agriculture; metaphysics; agrarianism; industrialism; pacifism; Hannah Arendt; Wendell Berry.

I. 'Every living step is a philosophical choice'

In the 1890s, Hayter Reed, Deputy Superintendent General of 'Indian Affairs' in the relatively new territory of Canada, stated that the permanent solution to the Indian problem involved 'the laborious and often dangerous work of transforming bands of savages into peaceable agricultural labourers'. He quoted from a contemporary book *Bible Teachings in Nature* as follows:

Corn precedes all civilization; with it is connected rest, peace and domestic happiness, of which the wandering savage knows nothing. In order to rear it nations must take possession of certain lands; and when their existence is thus firmly established, improvements in manner and customs speedily follow. They are no longer inclined for bloody wars, but fight only to defend the fields from which they derive their support. The cultivation of corn, while it furnishes man with a supply of food for the greater part of the year, imposes upon him certain labours and restraints, which have a most beneficial influence upon his character and habits.¹

Reed's view was typical of those times. Most Canadians viewed the fact that the Indians were *not*

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farmers as a crippling weakness in their society. Indian life, they knew, was inferior, and at the root of this conviction was their assumption that a life of virtue was dependent upon agrarianism, and that vice resulted from a hunting, nomadic lifestyle. The colonial government created farms as pedagogical projects for the Indians. These were places of probation, training grounds in the virtues of civilisation and citizenship.²

These agrarian concepts of order, progress and virtue were framed by Biblical injunction. The notion of land 'improvement', tied to agricultural productivity, has been pervasive in Christendom: the Elizabethans drained the swamps; the Cistercians made 'productive' the great 'wildernesses' of Europe. In being fruitful and multiplying, replenishing the earth and subduing it, the human vocation was intrinsically connected to agriculture. Agriculture was connected to civilisation, to reason itself. Nature demanded that we impose upon it a certain kind of order and productivity; the wilderness called out for 'improvement'. In contrast, the Indians of the plains were seen as 'thoughtlessly, carelessly living on the surface. Like the butterfly flitting from plant to plant, so these men roamed and camped and dreamed...', missing the opportunity to improve the land.³

Agriculture was considered the worthiest of all employments. Among scientists of this period, agriculture was seen as a key stage in the evolutionary development of human beings, associated with the rule of law, private property, virtuous self-reliance, thrift, industry and individualism. Farming was 'the mainspring of national greatness', the moulder of national and personal character.⁴ In this vision, agriculture is not simply the way that we get our food as a matter of mere biological necessity. It is a moral ideal. It is normative. It is the way *we ought* to live. The hypocrisies, falsities, and calamitous consequences of this ideal for the plains Indians hardly need repeating, not least because Indians did, in fact, cultivate the land, but in ways largely invisible to the settlers. Instead we can briefly contrast this narrative with another, more contemporary one.

In a well-known essay 'The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race', historian Jared Diamond presents an opposite thesis. He argues that 'the adoption of agriculture, supposedly our most decisive step toward a better life, was in many ways a catastrophe from which we have never recovered. With agriculture came the gross social and sexual inequality, the disease and despotism, that curse our existence'.⁵ Importantly, Diamond's devalorisation of agriculture is also normative. He argues that with farming not only does human health dramatically decline, but violence increases. It is a prompt for warfare and oppression, and creates social and economic classes. Diamond, just as much as the colonial Canadians, moralises agriculture.

These two moralisations of agriculture, one negative and one positive, reflect the wider narratives of each time and place. The Victorians were progressivists; we in postmodern, post-industrial societies tend to be declinists. The Victorians wanted to transcend nature; we want to reintegrate into nature. The Victorians were basically optimists about human beings; we tend to be pessimists. The Victorians wanted to civilise 'the savages'; in Western culture, indigenous peoples are often taken as a moral and social ideal. The 'state of nature' is admired, and often normative, for us (consider the popularity of so-called 'paleo' diets). For us, wilderness is not demonised but valorised. And agriculture's greatest 'growth' phase, its

most pronounced achievements of ‘improving’ the land—that is, modifying it for human use—we largely associate with ugliness. The legacy of the Romantic movement’s critique of the Industrial Revolution is a lasting suspicion of machines, automation, artificiality and lifestyles which distance us from nature. This is still formative of our moral and aesthetic sensibilities.

The purpose here is not to establish a historical thesis. The comparisons are meant simply to demonstrate how agriculture mediates a culture’s understanding of the place, rights, and role of human beings in the world. In our construal of agriculture is crystallised a picture of the good life: what a life well-lived looks like. Some of the most notorious totalitarian regimes of the 20th century had a valorisation of agriculture at their heart: both the Nazis and the Soviets moralised agriculture in distinctive ways, the latter with their famous ‘Blood and Soil’ programme, the former with their idealisation of the peasant farmer. In relatively socially conservative countries such as Switzerland, farming is a protected industry, a sacred image of cultural identity, a symbolic embodiment or vessel of national character.

Agriculture is a petri dish in which we can examine and bring to light a culture’s understanding of the human, and of nature.⁶ Given the preoccupation with the boundaries between nature and culture in contemporary philosophy, it is puzzling that agriculture, where it gains any attention at all, has generally been seen as a subset of applied ethics. It looks like a curious, specialist and technical enterprise, and the literature in philosophy largely reflects that, though it is gradually gaining more attention in theology. This neglect is both surprising and frustrating. It is odd that the idea of agriculture as a philosophical interest seems to require special defence, since it is, as a matter of sheer material exigency, the way the vast majority of us are able to continue our bodily lives in the world, philosophers and theologians included. This is true even if we have in our ordinary experience little or no exposure to it.

Aside from the fact that we only live by and through agriculture, its philosophical and theological significance could hardly be greater. The agricultural enterprise expresses a whole way of being human; reflectively or not, it expresses an understanding of what human beings should or could do in the world, assumptions we can broadly describe as metaphysical. The material questions about how we obtain our food reflect and reproduce our more-than-physical understandings of nature and the human.

In the pro-agriculture narrative of English settlers communities in Canada I outlined above, there is a view of agriculture as a moral high-point of humanity. In this picture, controlling and making-productive the earth in an interventionist way—a way which lastingly modifies the land—expresses *who we are supposed to be* in this world. In the anti-agriculture story, we are most reliably expressing our nature and our place in the order of things when we live on the earth more as the other animals do: as nomads, hunters and foragers. In the pro-agriculture story, our separateness from nature is valorised: our difference to it; our right, obligation or vocation, to make of it something more and different to what it otherwise is. In the anti-agriculture story, the stress is on leaving no trace, living lives that blend in, obtaining what we need using means that do not markedly distinguish us from nature at large, and do not create lasting modifications to our natural environments; we work with existing structures, we do not create new ones to the same extent. In the pro-agriculture story there is an emphasis on permanent structures; on creating a surplus to generate growth, at the level of both population and also of extended opportunity and

lasting security. In the anti-agriculture story, long-term storage, accumulation, population increase and lasting infrastructure are not valued. One gathers enough, and then one does the same the next season, and in this way humans express their conformity to the wider order of things.

We now live in a wholly agriculturalised global society. No-one seriously dreams, *pace* Diamond, that we will return to a paleolithic or hunter-gatherer way of life. But the fissure between the two stories outlined above permeates our cultures. The pre-agricultural life commands a powerful nostalgia in some northern hemisphere cultures. Elements of that life are held up as moral exemplars for us in the idealisation of indigenous peoples, a reverence for paleolithic diets, and the invocation of our lives as ‘cavemen’ as an argument for the normativeness of certain behaviours and lifestyles. In these societies, the social and cultural role of farmers and farming is formative and contested.

These differing valorisations of modes of human being on the earth are thus ongoing presences in our European or Western cultures, whose moral and social significance is underestimated. This is not significant only for our self-understanding, but also because within the established reality of a completely agriculturalised civilisation, we face real and increasingly urgent questions about how – with respect of what norms, and with reference to what moral and cultural frameworks – we carry out that activity.

There is a danger that we try to discern these choices only as practical quandaries, questions of efficiency, resource use, land management and so on. But a purely pragmatic approach neglects the way that agriculture raises these deeper questions of identity, direction and belonging. These questions are not merely ‘ethical’ in the sense of questions about particular actions. They are ‘metaphysical’ because they are questions about what a human being is, and what her place and role is in the wider order of things. Indeed, it is a distinctive (and equally metaphysical) feature of the thought-world of modern industrial agriculture that there *is* no such wider order to which we might be held responsible.

II. How Should We Farm?

When we drive past fields, crops and grazing animals we could consider the constructions of culture and worldview that underpin those activities, and how we participate in, and sustain, that culture and worldview every time we eat. In doing this we create the possibility of entering into some evaluative relationship with our metaphysical options. We can ask who we are taking ourselves to be, and whether we are happy with this interpretation of human life and the human place in the order of things. That is, we can ask who we *want* to be. We need to decide what the goods are that we wish to sustain. One further historical vignette may demonstrate the practical salience of this ‘metaphysics’ of farming.

In 1763, the King of England invited Mason and Dixon to draw their famous line bisecting New England. This line notoriously respects no natural boundaries of topography, climate or soil. In itself, it represents something of the distinctively modern approach to land management: it was created using newly developed surveying techniques, designed to settle a long-running proprietary dispute. The land, for Mason and Dixon and the king they represented, was not place but space: a continuous, homogenous extension, to be portioned and distributed according to the mathematical calculus of the new physical

sciences. In fact, the first attempt to complete the line was frustrated by the Iroquois guides of the surveying party, who refused to enter territories belonging to a neighbouring tribe. To the Iroquois, the land was not mere extension, but thickly textured and variegated with human meanings.⁷

The use of cartographical techniques as tools of colonial domination is well-known. The particular case of the Mason-Dixon line is interesting for another reason, which is that the demographics thus divided practiced quite different sorts of agriculture. In the region bisected by the line, identical climate, topography and soil became home to two completely different styles of farming. South of the line, in Maryland, were tobacco plantations farmed by the Catholic Calvert family. Enormously profitable, they were worked by indentured servants and slaves. If one crossed into the territories of the Quaker Penns north of the line, the plantations suddenly stopped. There, there were only sprawling family farms growing corn and wheat and keeping dairy herds. These Quakers could have made a lot more money starting tobacco plantations; many of them large families, taking refuge from desperate poverty in England and Wales, this would have been both tempting and legal. But the Quakers did not like the idea of slavery. They prized above all a harmonious religious and family life, expressed in the family farm unit. They sought to create agro-economic structures and patterns that would nurture the virtues of community, virtues which seemed incompatible with the cultural and social values of a plantation environment.

These two agricultures were divided not by what their material conditions made *physically* possible, but by the sort of world each community saw itself to be living in. It was culture, not material conditions, that determined what 'farming' meant to these two communities—the crops they grew, the methods they used to work the soil, to irrigate, to harvest, to landscape their places, with all the human habits of thought and feeling and social structure that such practices sustain, and are sustained by. Climate and landscape necessarily limit the kinds of agriculture that can be practiced. But the same landscape, soil and topography can be shaped to represent quite different visions of human and cosmic order.

In the same way, the issue humanity is now facing is not merely a functional one, concerning how we produce food while reducing our environmental impact. The merely utilitarian goal of a particular concrete outcome can be achieved in multiple ways. Agriculture is undetermined by its physical parameters. Perhaps we say that the goal of agriculture is to ensure the continuance of human life. But what is a human, and what is 'alive'? In the well-known film *The Matrix*, human beings in the dystopia of the future maintained by artificial intelligences in countless 'pods' through food and oxygen tubes, while their brains are artificially stimulated to produce an ersatz experience of real life. These human beings are alive, biologically speaking; perhaps they even lived long and, at least by a certain metric, 'healthy' lives. But most of us sense that that is not the kind of humanness, and the kind of aliveness, we wish to sustain. Life is more than physical continuance.

The goal of producing enough food for everyone to eat is possible to achieve securely within the context of reform and modification of existing industrial scale agriculture. This is in principle compatible with reducing environmental impact. We know that we need to reform the existing system to make it meet our pragmatic goals better. But this analysis of agriculture as a petri dish of our vision of the human suggests

that we should not frame the question about agricultural sustainability simply at the functional level. If the only question we are asking is—how can we feed everyone in a way which *literally* sustainable? As in, we can *literally* go on doing it?—then we are suffering a failure of imagination. The question is not only, ‘How shall we feed ourselves?’ The question is: ‘How does a given way of feeding ourselves express a particular vision of the human?’

When we ask how we should farm, we cannot evade the issue of what we think human life should look like. This question is prior to debates about land use, and land abuse. The notions of ‘land’ and ‘use’ already represent certain ways of imagining our relation to the world and our place on or in it. The difference between use and abuse depends on what one’s norm is, what one takes to be the moral centre, the definitive point of view. What many dislike about industrial agriculture is precisely its newness, its ‘unnaturalness’, as though in modernity we have made ourselves almost a new species. But what would be wrong with that? Where is the norm from which we depart by doing this? The modern transhumanists and the ancient Gnostics, for example, both propose that being distanced from nature *is* a good. But the observation that we have distanced ourselves from ‘nature’ does not *by itself* answer the question of who, and where, humans *should* be. It does not tell us what the good is that we should seek to sustain. A biological definition of the human provides no escape, given the conceptual difficulties around the notion of species and the ambiguity of the drawing moral conclusions from biological ‘facts’.

This paper does not attempt to answer these questions, but simply points out some limits of certain frameworks which we have recently adopted to answer them, specifically with reference to some tendencies in dominant strands of theological and Christian responses to the environmental crisis.

[III. Our Place in the Order of Things: Assessing Agrarianism](#)

In a famous 1967 article, Lynn White argued that Christianity was the agent of the environmental crisis because of its Biblically-inspired anthropocentrism. The strengths and weaknesses of his argument have been exhaustively debated in environmental theology and ethics. But there is one aspect of that legacy which should be raised once more, because his intervention has a consequence of particular gravity for the question of agriculture. In suggesting that the environmental crisis has been caused by a sense of Biblically warranted human entitlement to use an inert and disenchanted nature, he set the parameters of the conversation as follows: the appropriate ‘religious’ response to the environmental crisis is to *renaturalise the human* and to *resacralise the earth*. If nature’s disenchantment—its ‘disgoddling’, to use Schiller’s poignant phrase⁸—was the cause of its despoliation, let it be re-godded. Let us put the divine back into nature, and then we will no longer consider ourselves entitled to abuse it. If nature’s perceived inferiority was the cause of its despoliation, let it be made superior. And if the distancing of the human from nature is what made us lose our fellow-feeling for it, licensing us to use it for our own ends with casual disregard for its wellbeing, then let us restore the human to fellowship with nature. (White recommends the ‘panpsychism’ of a Francis of Assisi as the appropriate counterweight to Christianity’s dualism of God and nature, man and earth.)

Sacralising the earth and renaturalising the human have been twin keynotes of theological reflection on

the environmental crisis since then. (The extent to which these themes have penetrated the tradition itself is evident in *Laudato Si'*.) Deep incarnation; the earth as the body of God, Christian animism, panentheism, new emphases on sacramentality, embodiment and so on: all are attempts to draw the location of importance or value back into *this* world, to return the human to materiality and animality, to immanentise the transcendent.⁹ This trajectory both expresses and joins forces with the transcendentalist, Romantic and anti-industrialist movements in Anglo-America and northern Europe over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with the idealisation of 'the state of nature' undertaken by thinkers like Rousseau. And these moves are themselves in a straight line from the Reformation's sanctification of ordinary life. As sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski puts it, in the Protestant Reformation the transcendent is radicalised—drawn into this world. *Nature* is the new location of the sacred.¹⁰ This is a new metaphysics with a new picture of the place of the human in the world. We are to seek closeness to nature and the nonhuman; imitate it; return to it; revere it; to find in it our norms and patterns of life. (Noticing, of course, that this 'nature' is not the old nature of mediaeval Christendom that was the foundation of 'natural law'; nor is the 'nature' of the pre-Christian world. This is a new nature.) It coincides with a social, moral and aesthetic critique of technology and civilisation, a valorisation of wilderness, and the elevation of an 'indigenous' life of closeness to the earth.

As far as agriculture is concerned, this trajectory expresses itself in the standoff between industrialism and agrarianism. Two different ways of conceiving the good life and the human place in the natural world are imagined and realised in these two models of our relation to the earth. (Properly speaking I should refer here to neo-agrarianism, to distinguish it from the agrarianism of Homer and Virgil, but I shall call it agrarianism for simplicity.) Agrarianism is an application of that wider trajectory of the sacralisation of the earth and the naturalisation of the human. In the work of theologians? like Wendell Berry and Norman Wirzba, the Christian resonance of the agrarian vision is abundantly on display.

One of the greatest strengths of agrarianism is precisely the fineness of its awareness that how we farm expresses our worldview and our sense of our place in the order of things; concretely, it expresses our sense of what that order is, where it comes from, and what kind of accountability we have to it. Specifically, it regards the order of the earth itself as *the* order to which we belong, to which our natures demand allegiance. In the agrarian vision, farming is our fullest entering-into this immanent sacrality of the world itself, our discovery of our place in the order of things. There we find our truth and our meaning. Our agricultural practices both in scale and in method should be measured by this.

Heidegger famously compared mechanised agriculture to the gas chambers: brutalising the earth is in continuity with the ultimate form of violence which is designed, systematic genocide.¹¹ This is extreme, but in contemporary agrarian literature, such a characterisation of industrialism is hard not to sympathise with.¹² Ruthlessly cutting across nature's own patterns, industrial food production rides roughshod over the limits and seasons of soil, topography, biological community, weather and climate. It has no place for human embodied relation with the material environment. Brutalising the earth with mechanical and chemical means, the softness of soil, wood and flesh are pulverised under implacable juggernauts of metal and rubber. Anything but sacred, the earth is handled as though it is mere stuff, Heidegger's famous 'standing reserve': the world exists only as a resource for us. Related to only in the mode of

use, it is wholly instrumentalised.¹³ This is the human being not *in* but *on* the earth; in our machinised modes of relation to it we are wholly removed from it, buffered, un-creaturely. Alienating us from our material places, it deprives us of experiencing and realising our creatureliness, our belonging to the world. In its demonic appetite for production it gives Sabbath, or rest, to neither flesh nor soil. In its scale it destroys communities; in its methods it destroys our animal bond with soil and place. Forgetting that the means are reproduced in the ends, it cares only for the product and not for the process. In so doing it instrumentalises and reifies the human body, making the human herself also a mechanised and chemicalised reality. Eating is reduced to functional nutrition, growing to chemical and mechanical engineering. The earth is not nurtured but tortured into producing her fruits.

The agrarian sensibility, in contrast, is a feeling for the human as a fragile animal participant in an earth which represents a real norm for us, in which and to which we belong, under the yoke of which we are formed and disciplined, and separation from which is homelessness, alienation, deracination. In the agrarian vision industrialised agriculture can only be seen as a form of violence, in its scale, in its methods, and in the societal patterns it generates. For Wendell Berry, for example, agrarianism and pacifism are twin aspects of a single political practice of resistance to forces which alienate people from one another and from the earth. Agrarianism, as an imagining of the human as one of an earth community, while not indulging the full nostalgia of Diamond and others who long for a return to a state of nature, nevertheless shares a family resemblance with it. The safety of surplus and the bufferedness from the natural environment represented in industrialism are viewed as falls from a harmony with nature. In imagining that our relation with the earth could be the peaceful, harmonious one with the paradisaical image of humans as seamless members of an earth community, with its oft-commented on utopianism of family, farmstead, oneness with the seasons and cycles and norms of nature, agrarianism's sacralisation of earth and naturalisation of the human wants to diminish our separateness. In its dream of peace between us and the earth, it is utopian. 'To be alienated from the land and from each other is to embody the potential for violence.'¹⁴

Despite my instinctive sympathy with agrarianism, I want finally to explore, against the grain of my own feeling, some hesitations about agrarianism as a metaphysic, which are in turn hesitations about the sacralisation of the earth and the naturalisation of the human as defining our response to environmental crisis. Bringing these hesitations to light may help to focus our minds on what we need from a metaphysic which supports an agriculture in, by and through which we can sustain the human.

[IV. Accepting the Human Condition](#)

Philosopher Hannah Arendt connects agriculture with the human condition itself by categorising agriculture as *work*. *Work* is not the animal activity of simply sustaining the life of an organism: eating, metabolising, excreting. *Work* is a distinctively human activity in which we enduringly modify the material environment to promote our own ends. For Arendt, work contains a fundamental element of violence. As workers, human beings 'do violence to nature because they disturb what, in the absence of mortals, would be the eternal quiet of being-forever that rests or swings within itself'.¹⁵ Indeed, 'this

element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and homo faber, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature.¹⁶ In Arendt's view, one living organism attacking and consuming another does not constitute violence; as an ordinary reality in the natural realm, it belongs to the general category of necessity. Once killed, the prey is instantly incorporated into the life process of the predator, whereas the worker maintains its material outside the realm of nature, fixed in the durable world. Nature is 'forceful' but not violent. Arendt's view resembles that of the Greeks. They associated agriculture with work because they emphasized the violent element in it, its reliance on 'technical devices,' by which one 'tore from the womb of the earth the fruits which the gods had hidden from men.'¹⁷

Arendt's analysis suggests that in agriculture is crystallised something of the *unease*, the *disharmony*, in the human relationship to our material context. In its idealisation of certain methods and scales of agriculture, agrarianism resists acknowledging the technological human, what Arendt calls *homo faber*, as necessarily over against nature and not just part of it. It courts a kind of refusal to consent to what Arendt calls 'the human condition'. In idealising agriculture as an expression of creatureliness and membership of the earth—that is, in re-naturalising the human—it diminishes the other and necessary pole which we require from a workable philosophical anthropology: that the condition of the human is to be necessarily to some degree alienated from the earth.

A sign of this is the association of agrarianism with pacifism, a refusal of the necessary violence of the agricultural enterprise, which is to say, the human enterprise itself. The command to till and keep in Genesis is part of the curse of our departure from Eden, both a mandate and a warning that as agricultural beings our relationship to the earth contains enmity and struggle as well as fellowship. But agricultural activity is just violent—in premodernity, to human bodies (a fact which the critics of industrial agriculture are slow to admit), and also to the earth itself. Whether or not the worm forgives the plough, in John Stewart Collis' famous image of agrarian idyll,¹⁸ we do and must plough anyway. The vegetarian and vegan movements of recent decades fantasise about the possibility of a purely nonviolent relationship to the earth. The advocates of these movements sometimes give the impression that it is possible to live without killing. But as any gardener knows, if one wants to grow anything, one must in general be willing to do violence to other organisms, especially those that wish to eat what one grows. In our urgency to re-establish the community of the human and the natural, there is a risk for idealising the activity of farming, failing to reconcile ourselves to its deep ambivalence, just as in sacralising the earth we often also sentimentalise it.

In the DNA of contemporary agrarianism is a seed of something that is awry with environmentalism more widely: a discomfort with our human distance from nature, our transcendence of its norms, our freedom to redefine ourselves, to seek elsewhere than this earth our standard of living. This results in a difficulty reconciling with, and celebrating, actual human life, which is caught between a sense of belonging and a sense of not-belonging, a dialectic which agriculture expresses. It is not an accident that it is in ethical monotheism—where God, the centre of value, is actually in some sense removed from the earth—that agriculture is valorised as a human activity in a very particular way. The Hebrew tradition recognises that agriculture expresses *both* our dependence on the earth *and* our alienation from

it. A metaphysics which stresses only the naturalisation of the human and the sacralisation of the earth will encourage us subtly into a deep disparagement of ourselves and our lives on the earth. The same problem is cropping up in theological anthropology: if we insist, in an understandable reaction to Cartesianism, that I *am* my body, it becomes difficult for us to narrate constructively our sense of unease and ambivalence with our bodies—an ambivalence which is inherent in the very possibility of speaking about ‘*my* body’ in the first place, and which generates some of our most human habits of self-representation, self-adjudication and self-narration.

Nature is by no means our norm, and nor is it our limit, no matter how much we may dream otherwise. Our emotional difficulty with confronting this is apparent in the reluctance of many ecologically sensitive people to acknowledge the glaringly obvious truth that industrial agriculture has lifted billions of people out of poverty and backbreaking, life-destroying labour. Desacralising nature and denaturalising the human was an essential step in this achievement.

Conclusion: The Metaphysics Agriculture Needs

An agricultural future worthy of human beings needs a metaphysics which takes human earthliness seriously but does not absolutise it. In turn, a consideration of agriculture pushes us to reconcile ourselves to the human condition: a condition of ambivalence and fracturedness, *as well as* fellowship and belonging. Farming takes place in that space of ambivalence; a fraught complicity with a necessary violence, an answerability to other creatures that at the same time demands that we recognise our unlikeness to them, our need and desire to march to a different tune than nature’s. We need a language for this *un*-naturalness of humans, as well as our naturalness. If we cannot engage in this way, agriculture will be given over to functionalism and consequentialism, as it currently is, in which the primary criterion is the efficient production of the greatest quantity of food for the greatest number of people.

There is, to be sure, an enormous difference between the kind of violence represented by industrial agriculture and that represented by me growing food in my own garden. One task for such a metaphysic will be to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate kinds of violence. A metaphysic up to this task is inherent in classical Christian anthropology: a strong doctrine of creation side-by-side with a frankness about our sense of not being finally at home in nature, and a long history of complex and risky discernment of our complicity in different kinds of violence.

A deep reconciliation with our human condition is essential if we are to offer a nuanced, realistic and workable alternative to the current agricultural paradigm. Accepting that agriculture puts us at a definitive distance from nature and reveals to us, whether we like it or not, something of our *un*-naturalness, is the condition for making a meaningful critique of current industrial norms. Simply to decry industrialism as technological, unnatural, and therefore bad, is sure to result in nostalgia, idealism, and the cultivation of alternatives that cannot be workable for the whole human family—and the result will be a business as usual which, given the condition of our planet, we cannot afford.



Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, Second Edition (London: McGill Queen's University Press, 2019), 15.
- 2 See *ibid.*, Ch. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 5 Jared Diamond, 'The Worst Mistake In The History Of The Human Race', *Discover Magazine* (May 1987: 64-66), 64.
- 6 A petri dish, a small round container used in laboratories, allows the characteristics of a 'culture' (usually of micro-organisms) to be studied in toto from above.
- 7 For the history in this and subsequent paragraphs I am indebted to the authoritative treatment of Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), and conversation with Americanist Dr. William Foster.
- 8 The phrase "die Entgötterung der Natur" occurs in Schiller's 1788, 25-stanza-poem 'The Gods of Greece' ('Die Götter Griechenlandes').
- 9 See e.g. Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (London: Orbis, 2019); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Michigan: Fortress Press, 1993); Mark Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature* (Michigan: Fortress Press, 2005).
- 10 *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2005).
- 11 'Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of countries, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.' Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is*, trans. Andrew Mitchell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 27.
- 12 The agrarian vision is an aesthetic as much as a moral one, as Wendell Berry expresses in his well-known comments about the hellish landscape of modern industries of mass extraction. 'The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-Mining Morality in East Kentucky', in *The Long-Legged House* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004).
- 13 Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper & Row, 1977).
- 14 William Major, 'Other Kinds of Violence: Wendell Berry, Industrialism and Agrarian Pacifism', *Environmental Humanities* (3: 2013), 25-41, 32.
- 15 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin, 2006), 42.
- 16 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 139.
- 17 Arendt, *Past and Future*, 209.
- 18 John Stewart Collis, *The Worm Forgives the Plough* (London: Vintage Classics, 2009). The title is a quotation from William Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*, 'The cut worm forgives the plough'.



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