ETHICS, ETHOS AND HABITAT – PART ONE

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The purpose of this essay is to elaborate upon the idea that character is a way of dwelling in the world. In the most profound sense, ethics has to do with the way one inhabits the earth. In the fullest sense your habitat is your mode of dwelling. The extent to which you have character or personhood is determined by the style in which you live and move and have your being on the earth. The ethics of habitat is far more significant than the ethics of rules and it is of greater depth than the ethics of situational response, although, as I shall be arguing later, it must incorporate both the structures of human relationship (including rules) and the immediacy of spontaneous response (including aspects of "situation ethics").

The word "ethics" derives from ethikos, which in turn relates to the Greek ethos. Ethos has a broad range of meanings: custom, habit, character, house, nation. What I wish to point out – and what has often been neglected in ethical writings – is that these meanings, associated with ethos, have to do with dwelling and habitation. We probably tend to think of dwelling as merely a place, but that is superficial. The way we dwell, the things and persons we dwell among, and the things that dwell in us are all part of the way in which we inhabit the earth. When Aristotle developed ethics as the science of character, he compared the function of character with that in a drama which determines what a particular person will do.[1] It has to do with the inner determinants of an individual's responses, relationships, style and decisions. Obviously, many things go into the formation of one's character, and it should be equally obvious that there is a continual interplay between the inner self and the stage setting, the plot, the other characters, and the given dramatic milieu of the play. It may not be too much to say that as the stage player lives and enacts his part – which is how he dwells in and through the drama – so, one's ethics may be viewed as the style in which he/she incorporates (embodies) the cultural ethos so as to develop his/her habitat on the earth.

If we are going to talk any sense at all about ethics, there must be

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[1] *Poetics,* 1454a35. Cf. *ibid.,* chap. 6, and *Nichomachean Ethics,* II, 5, 6; V, 9, VI, 4.

a backdrop depicting the dominant problems of the times. I am not going to comment on these problems, but merely suggest an outline for organizing our thought about them. My assumption is that any significant discussion of ethics at this moment in history must be with this plethora of interlocking problems in mind.[2]

1. Problems arising from social structures of governance and power:
   i. War and the military-industrial complex
   ii. Injustice and oppression
   iii. Terrorism and the cult of violence
   iv. Breakdown of means of distribution of goods and services
   v. Maladjustment between structures of power and structures of social responsibility
2. Problems that derive from the human condition at this stage of historical evolution:
   i. Environmental problems
   ii. Natural resources
   iii. Technology and disposal problems
   iv. Population increase and pressures
   v. Hunger and food
   vi. Monitary instability and economic dislocation
   vii. Rising expectations
3. Problems that have to do with cultural patterns and life structures, with mores, folkways, and conventions:
   i. The erratic rate of social change
   ii. Family and relationship patterns
   iii. Voluntary associations
   iv. Dissolution (or remolding) of patterns of sub-cultures
   vi. Disenchantment with establishments and despair of their capable performance
4. Problems involved in being an individual at such a time in such world:
   i. Depression and malaise
   ii. Escapism and denial
   iii. Maintaining integrity
   iv. Alienation and meaninglessness

[2]To be sure, many aspects of ethical theory and language can be discussed abstractly. I am using "ethics" in the sense of ordinary usage, which assumes a direct connection with actual life problems. As for literature on these contemporary problems, it is vast. Robert L. Heilbroner's *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (N.Y.: Norton. 1974) remains one of the best summary statements.

v. Cynicism and loss of confidence
vi. The loss of other-worldliness as any longer an available, efficatious compensation for worldly despair

There are many comments which might be made concerning this cluster of problems, but that is the subject for a different essay. The focus of this is, given these problems, what has the ethics of habitat to say about dwelling in the midst of them?

I. Underdevelopment and Overchoice

The human predicament can be described as one of underdevelopment and overchoice. In several senses. In the customary sense of underdevelopment, that is, lacking the technology and skills for the management of a society in the modern world, there is plainly the need for development, and much has been written about that. In addition, there are many ways in which the technologically developed world can be regarded as either underdeveloped or not adequately equipped and matured with respect to the life needs facing it. For example, the structures of responsibility and accountability are inadequate and outmoded with respect to the structures of power. The serious conflicts that threaten war and cause severe human loss at this time are not primarily *between* nation states. Ireland, Lebanon, India, Iraq, Spain, Portugal and the Philippines call to mind conflicts which are infranational, not international. Other conflicts, such as the recent one in Angola, are both infranational and metanational, that is, between coalitions of states and power blocs. Or to put it negatively, the line of conflict does not coincide with a national boundary. In order to understand the difficulties of the United Nations in recent decades it is necessary to recognize that it was designed to prevent war *between nations,* as its name reminds us, but meanwhile the conflicts have merged most sharply *within nations* and between power blocs that do not correspond to national units. Another example is found in the multinational corporations, for which there exist no adequate and comparable political structures to exact accountability or enforce social responsibility.[3]

In a roughly similar way the structures of metropolitan governance find themselves unable to cope with the forms and flow of power – always keeping in mind that power has many manifestations –, which like rivers and weather blithely ignore political boundaries. I do not think it stretches the point too much to suggest that something

[3]See, e.g., Richard C. Longworth, "Writing the Rule Book," *Saturday Review,* Jan. 24, 1976. Alvin Toffler, *The Eco-Spasm Report* (N.Y.: Bantam, 1975), provides very dramatic senarios.

like this has happened with respect to the institutions and conventions that have to do with individual and primary group social relationships. The cheap response is to blame this situation on the oppressive and stupid nature of the establishment. Establishments may well be oppressive and those who manage them have been known for stupidity or villany or both, but frequently this is an inadequate analysis of the difficulty if it is also the case that the structure of management is simply not adapted to the forces that are regnant and the form in which those forces are manifest. Whether people are less mature than in former times is doubtful, because in former times they were shored up by structures and reenforced by sanctions that, so to speak, kept them functioning more or less adequately. As I have talked with men who worked during the first half of the twentieth century, I recall having been impressed with the extent to which their lives were surrounded by a scaffolding of supports and restraints. They might have functioned just as well without these – who knows? –, but the fact is they had little time for domestic maladjustments, and when they got out of line, for whatever reason, the sanctions usually were immediately brought into effect.

G. K. Chesterton once said that "A key has no logic; its only logic is that it turns the lock." Many instruments of coping with life are like that. Or rather, their failure is due to the way they mis-match the factors they are supposed to turn. I remember hearing John Dos Passos many years ago, referring to the years following World War I. As nearly as I can recall his exact words, he said, "We had the keys that would unlock all the doors of the world's problems, but meanwhile somebody had changed the locks." My point is that this can happen at the individual level in life as well as in the large social dimensions. Inability to cope with the problems that present themselves, whether due to ignorance, ineptness, or lack of expertise, is what I mean by underdevelopment. And in that broad sense it is characteristic of individuals as well as states, and of industrial societies as well as tribal or agrarian ones.

The other side of this, which greatly complicates things, is overchoice, to borrow Toffler's term. Again, I am giving this a broad and somewhat unusual meaning. Generally it refers to the predicament of privileged persons in a highly developed society, especially young persons. Faced with multifarious possibiilties, the individual is bewildered, if not paralyzed, by the necessity to choose. It is my contention that something like overchoice afflicts us in a multitude of ways. Thus by "overchoice" I mean simply more alternatives to select from than can be managed. If some of the attractive alternatives are an illusion,

or if the consequences of some alternatives are hidden, you have added to the confusion of many choices the rage of false options. That the false option was due to self-deception, rather than betrayal by others does not seem to diminish the rage that ensues. Since there are always villains and scoundrels enough and to spare, and since the best people have their imperfections, there is no difficulty in pinning the blame, which is especially appealing if the alternative is to accept the responsibility oneself.

Another disadvantage of overchoice is that it invites switching routes when the going gets rough or boring. Quite obviously there are times when it is wise to change our course. There are, however, many enterprises in which goals are reached only by persistence with *some* course, and in which too many changes thwart rather facilitate realization. Consider such a commonplace example as learning to play a musical instrument. Switch to a different instrument every few months, switch teachers and teaching methods every time there is frustration, and the learner is going to make little progress with any instrument, but will be an expert in the game of switcheroo. Or imagine a chef who keeps changing his mind about what it is he is going to cook. Or imagine a student who keeps changing schools. Or a country that keeps changing its forms of government or basic policies. Again, let me stress the acknowledgment that there are certainly times when a change is called for: when the menu should be changed, when the student should change schools, when a country should change its policy. That is what makes this a dilemma, considering that persistent pursuit of a particular path is the only way that significant realization can be achieved. The fact that life today presents a greater range of options — or, if you will, that we perceive it that way — constitutes more of a problem than a solution if disciplined pursuit happens to be what is required for human satisfaction to emerge.

There are times when life confronts us with clear requirements. However severe they may be, there is a certain satisfaction in the clarity of the demand. So George Eliot observed in *Scenes from Clerical Life:*

> No wonder that the sick room and the lazaretto have so often been a refuge from the tossings of intellectual doubt — a place of refuge for the wounded spirit. Here is a duty about which all creeds and philosophies are one; here at least conscience will not be dogged by doubt; the benign impulse will not be checked by adverse theory, here you may begin to act without settling one preliminary question.

That statement calls to mind a situation in which I was commanded by a dying patient to get the bedpan. As it happened, I did not know where the bedpan was, but I can tell you that I moved quickly and decisively to determine where such information could be obtained. There was about all this a certain specificity which, as George Eliot says, put aside all the tossings of intellectual doubt. My point is that many life situations lack that clear directive. Hence the perplexing decisional circumstance. For instance, most everyone would agree that there are circumstances when divorce is the right solution and certainly better than a seriously destructive marriage. They would also agree that every marriage of value is enriched by weathering some storms, living through some difficulties, and sticking together when there is precious little of the "for better" and more than enough of the "for worse." But how to tell the difference between the one and the other? That is the rub. Furthermore, if you ask people who have been through this, it is sobering to find them saying that they still are not sure. That is simply one example of the many decisional circumstances that constitute an authentic dilemma in modern life. What impresses me more and more is the fact that persons in quite different economic or occupational circumstances face this dilemma in a variety of forms. That they do not have the same choices does not mean for a moment that they do not have choices forced upon them and consequences to consider. They do. And their problem – whatever their class identity – is to learn how to live with their decisions and the consequences of those decisions.

This brings us to a juncture at which Erik Erikson's concept of "generativity" is relevant.[4] According to Erickson a generative person is one who cares for what he/she has brought in to being. The modern person, he says, aspires to do more than he is able or willing to care for. Now to care for means two things: to care *about,* in the sense that one has feelings of affection and interest in the reality which has been brought into being and to take care *of,* in the sense that one exercises responsible stewardship for this reality. The problem of the modern person is his/her inability to care (in both senses) for that which he/she has created. It is not unusual for a commmunity to create a public park yet not be able or willing to supervise it. School buildings can be rebuilt, but maintenance of the program that is supposed to take place in the building is another matter. Technological advances excite curiosity and can win public or governmental support, but the fallout of problematic by-products of polution and disease is ignored and neglected.

[4]*Insight and Responsibility* (N.Y.: Norton, 1964), 131f.

II. Vision and Meaning

One of the marks of maturity – in contrast with immaturity and what I am calling underdevelopment – is to be able to see, and indeed to create, a sense of excitement and meaning in the prosaic and pedestrian dimensions of life with their responsibilities. An immature person sees excitement in rush week at college, but not in the library; in the wedding reception, but not in housework; in the baby shower, but not in changing diapers; in the new flirtation, but not in filing an income tax return; in flying now, but not in paying later; in the election night victory party, but not in legislative home work; in being called to a new parish, but not in those dutiful parish calls where it is a fight to stay awake; in buying a new guitar, but not in practicing on it. The list is endless.

We do not need anybody to tell us that in every case the first item is *more fun* than the second. A baby shower *is* more fun than changing diapers, especially at three a.m. Despite its costly suffering, the American Revolution and all that went with it were more exciting than the grubby and often disillusioning work of national maintenance and governance. One response to this has been to downgrade fun and excitement with the claim that what life is about is really drudgery and a deadly sense of duty. Another response – that of authentic maturity – has been to value the celebrational and fun episodes of life, but to know also that they are part of a process that includes the drudgery and the work, the prosaic and the pedestrian, and to bring to the prosaic something of the poetry of meaning and to see in the pedestrian duties something of the dancing meaning of the whole process.

Now given the conditions of overchoice, and given the problems – both social and individual – of these times, the concept of stewardship gains crucial importance. This is especially true when so much theological writing of the late sixties was a fun and games interpretation of life, or perhaps it is fairer to say, was understood by so many people to be that. I find it both interesting and encouraging that more people are asking for the dimensions of dignity and nobility, of reverence and majesty, in our worship services, who a few years ago were calling worship boring and asking for what they called "contemporary worship," which so often seemed to be the worship of the contemporary. Again, let me say that I have no quarrel with the Christian highlighting of the joyful, the fun-filled, the frivolous, and the spontaneous moments that are a gift of life – nor with worship that is in that vein –, I am merely saying that as a steady diet it wears thin and

grows tiresome. More to our point just now, it does not encapsulate and crystalize the durable and luminous meanings that a faith perspective ought to bring, in season and out.

A pastor in California recently was startled at the conclusion of the scripture reading to have a member of the congregation, who is a bit odd and given to spontaneous expression, rise and demand, "Well, what is the punch line?" In some ways that is a good question. Looked at in another way, that epitomizes the false notion that the meaning of scripture, like the meaning of life, is to be found in punch lines or nut shells and in the moments that provide kicks rather than the years that yield depth and grace. He might have replied, "stay tuned for the sermon," or "think on these things and ponder them in your heart."

It so falls that the needs of the world and of societies coalesce with our deepest personal needs on this matter. That society needs faithful and devoted service of the long haul is clear enough, but many people do not understand that they themselves would be far better off psychologically and spiritually if they understood the essenital function of the stewardship lifestyle. Kicks provide excitement, but not, in and of themselves, meaning. And the greai void in modern existence is emptiness of meaning. As John Ciardi once put it, "Modern man is a creature of glandular enthusiasm, but of intellectual pessimism."

Meaning is like the patterned beauty of a tapestry. It emerges out of the interweaving of all the threads in their wholeness. If you pull out only the threads of vivid color and clutch them, you find yourself wondering where the toughness as well as the beauty of that patterned wholeness has gone. This, precisely, is one of the functions of a faith perspective. And it is one of the necessary attributes of maturity in ethics. Out of such thoughts comes the unforgettable poignancy of the opening words of one of W. E. Orchard's prayers: "We would stay for a moment the noisy shuttle of time, that we may watch the pattern it is weaving."[5] Or John Dewey: "whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious."[6]

To summarize up to this point, we must not forget the connection between ethics and ethos. Ethics has to do with more than rules and sanctions. It has to do with character and what is popularly called lifestyle, with the way we live in the world. The way we live — especially in the quest for fulfillment of meaning — is related to the way we perceive ourselves in that environing context that surrounds,

[5]*The Temple* (N.Y.: Dutton, 1918), p. 70.
[6]*Intelligence in the Modern World*, ed. J. Ratner (N.Y.: Modern Library, 1939), p. 1012.

sustains and frustrates us. It is not surprising that recent years have produced so many books on the theme of "wholeness," for in fragmented times and in a fractured world the idea of recovering a sense of wholeness acquires urgent force. There is a natural relationship as well as verbal between being crazy and a vase that is crazed, that is, interlaced with cracks, or, as the slang version has it, cracking up.

There is nothing unusual about being confused, then to get the word or be given the direction that enables us to put things once again into relation. So we exclaim, "Oh I see!" A lifestyle that is informed by faith provides just that vision of wholeness and interrelatedness that clarifies and vivifies meaning, whether this occurs in worship or fellowship or instruction. When it happens there is something wondrously restorative about it.

This, although it is certainly not new, opens new possibilities for understanding theology as vision. So we find Teilhard de Chardin explaining his major opus: "This work may be summed up as the attempt *to see* and *to make others see. . . .Seeing.* We might say that the whole of life lies in that verb. . . .vision is really fuller being."[7] And Whitehead, speaking of the religious *vision*: "Apart from it, human life is a flash occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience."[8]

As a foil for this view, Ecclesiastes is a very contemporary work. It expresses what Jastrow called "gentle cynicism" – at best, resignation; at worst, bitter rejection of life. The thing that is noteworthy about Koheleth – the author, whoever he was – is his strenuous effort to find meaning in life by going exclusively after one pursuit and then another: wisdom, love, money, fun. If, however, meaning emerges only from the interwoven wholeness, then desperate grasping for one strand after another will only mock us, as Koheleth seems to have found out.

Ethics has to do with ethos – character – and how we play it (in the best sense) in the drama of life. How we live in this world and how we relate to one another is intimately connected with how we see it, that is, the vision and the insight, the outlook and the perspective, that constitute a chaos or a cosmos.

Many of the problems that were cited at the outset are problems of human survival, whether biologically or of civilization or culture, of sanity or dignity in a fragmented age. That theme of survival ties in with these words from Teilhard, written many years ago, but having prophetic force now as then: "To see or to perish is the very condition

[7]*The Phenomenon of Man* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 31, 33. Ital. in text.
[8]*Science and the Modern World* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1925), p. 275.

laid upon everything that makes up the universe, by reason of the mysterious gift of existence. And this, in superior measure, is man's condition."[9]

The contemporary moral crisis arises from underdevelopment, which is to say, inadequacy for coping with the conditions that confront us, and overchoice, which is to say, more alternatives for decision than can be sorted out, weighed and pursued with digilence. Either of these would be aggravating, but in combination they present a particularly baffling form of confusion that is destructive of a sense of meaning. The current cultural situation may be no worse than that of many previous periods of history. In certain respects it may well be better. But what seems to characterize it is this loss of a sense of meaning, at least for many, many people. The combination of underdevelopment and overchoice provides a clue for understanding the basis of this loss. One important way that religion can contribute to overcoming this loss is in the nurture of a vision of life – a way of perceiving and relating daily events – which strengthens hope, encourages loyalty and vivifies the appreciation of values.

III. Strictures and Structures

There are many ways that one might organize an accout of the history of twentieth century ethical philosophy. If I were to do so in some detail, I would begin with G. E. Moore's indefinability of the good,[10] viewing subsequent theories as either a refinement and development, along one line or another, of his position or a reaction against his argument in favor of one of a number of alternative positions. Now one of the major trends that has characterized moral philosophy during this period of extraordinary debate has been the decline, if not demise, of moral strictures. Moralistic preachment has simply gone out of fashion. Of course, that stance is still to be found, but it is an oddity in the sense that it is not taken seriously. That is to say, it is not expected to be used as a guide for policy decisions.

A "stricture" is an adverse criticism. By moralistic strictures I mean the habitual stance of denunciation from an allegedly superior moral position. It is moralistic in the sense that it is unhelpful and simplistic. This does not mean that moral denunciation is always inappropriate. That would be a position both impossible and irresponsible to maintain. What is characteristic of the approach of moralistic stricture is the illusion that having denounced and disapproved, one's duty has been done and a superior moral level achieved. The demise

[9]*The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 31, referring of course to Prov. 29:18.
[10]*Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

of this approach, in the sense that it is no longer taken seriously by serious persons, is to be applauded.

The "emotive theory" of ethics exposed one reason for this demise. The emotivists held that all ethical statements are really disguised and indirect ways of talking about one's own feelings or desire to control the behavior of others.[11] However mistaken they were in claiming this to be the only possible kind of moral judgment, they were surely correct in some cases, and nowhere more clearly so than with the habitual stance of moralistic strictures.

At the same time, it must be noted that another by-product of this demise has been a widespread moral confusion and avoidance of moral judgment and responsibility. This sometimes takes the form of equating value judgments with emotional states, which is an extraordinary confusion. Sometimes it takes the form of the sophomoric question, "who's to say?" when confronted with the inescapability of a moral judgment, and which is a question that can be put — quite pointlessly — to any assertion on any subject. Thus if we welcome the demise of strictures, we may well lament the pervasive fog that in many quarters has settled over areas of moral judgment.

This brings us to the subject of structure, which I believe is receiving renewed emphasis. Dean Kelley put it this way:

> One of the needs of at least some of our contemporaries is for more structured lives. State hospitals are crowded with children and alolescents with weak ego boundaries, who feel insecure and frightened because they do not know what the world expects of them or what they can expect of the world. All of us experience this to some extent: we feel ourselves adrift in a shapeless, borderless, unpredictable world, and we seek asylum from this intolerable condition.[12]

Many a hippie commune of the sixties discovered quickly that there must be some dependable structures of responsibilities, duties and boundaries for the group to function. Many of them developed more rigid rules and penalties than had characterized the domiciles from which the members had fled. Other who had wandered about in aimless and borderless existence fled to the authoritarian rigidity of

[11]This brief statement is hardly fair to the subtleties and varieties of emotivist theories, but this is the nub of the matter. Cf. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (N.Y.: Dover, 1936), chap. 6, and C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale, 1944), chap. 4.

[12]*Why the Conservative Churches Are Growing* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 170.

the Krishna Consciousness Temple, Rev. Moon, Guru Maharaj Ji, or est.

It is a familiar enough phenomenon when people who have found life without pattern – formless and normless – to be intolerable that they turn to authoritarian rigidity. The confusion that must be cleared up results from equating structure with authoritarianism and freedom with chaos. The only freedom which is functionally real is that which provides opportunity for choice of direction and clarity of options within some dependable pattern. An efficient traffic system is not to be confused with having a dictator in every car, but it must, above all, provide clear and reliable rules of driving. The kind of freedom that would obtain where there were no regulations or commonly accepted procedures would be paralyzing in its effect. Freedom is as readily destroyed by formless chaos as by tyrannous coertion.

A similar confusion obtains regarding permissiveness. There is that type which means simply the absence of boundaries, procedural structure and consequences. There is the other type which permits liberty of choice, direction and pace within agreed upon ground rules, contractual arrangements and well marked boundaries. There are always dictatorial persons around who exploit this confusion, making authoritarian rigidity the only alternative to chaos. And, sad to say, there are also plenty of muddleheaded people who see clarity of structure as the enemy of freedom.

Hence this is a social as well as personal problem. In the latest Freedom House survey on the state of freedom in the world only one in five persons enjoys full political and civil rights. A year earlier it was one in three.[13] While changes in India account for much of the statistical reversal, still it is extremely depressing that almost half the world's population has practically no civil freedom. And it is all too certain that if basic problems of food, employment, and civil order are not solved to a reasonable and minimal degree, more people will choose or submit to a rule which, however oppressive, promises to deliver those necessities. It is necessary also to note that for structures to provide the possibility of freedom, it is essential that they have clarity and, to the extent possible, simplicity. It is the curse of bureaucracy to beget elaborate regulations, which in their confusing and burdensome array thwart freedom in a most frustrating manner. Once again, confusion of structure, whether from the absence of pattern or proliferation of regulation, is contrary to freedom. This does not negate the point that meaningful freedom requires structural regularity if some sort.

[13]January, 1976.

Whitehead long ago enunciated the idea that value is "the outcome of limitation."[14] Pure potentiality or pure creativity can produce nothing.[15] This has theological bearing on the doctrine of creation, where you do not have God as mechanic, architect, magician, or watch-winder-emeritus of the universe, but God as the imposition of order on what otherwise would be chaos: a spirit moving over the waters of the deep, separating light from darkness, firmament from earth, and mankind as naming and internalizing the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is no accident that many process philosophers have emphasized the connection between value and structure, creation and delimitation, because processes which culminate in life values cannot occur except by the movement from inchoate to definite actualization, from potential multiplicity to specific individuation.

All good cooks know this. It has long seemed to me that philosophizing about value would be vastly improved if we paid more attention to the phenomenon of food, which after all is not a symbol of value but one of the elemental values.[16] It is so obvious that different spices must be kept in different containers; that you have to decide from a welter of possibilities what you are going to cook; and that there are patterned procedures that have to be followed just so, if the outcome is to be satisfactory. To suppose that the artistry of life — individually, in primary groups or community, in society — is categorically different is to court disaster and result in something more akin to the garbage heap than a work of art.

Now analogies do not prove a thesis, but they may serve to explain and illustrate a perspective, which is what I have tried to do. The example of food and nourishment is, I think, particularly helpful, since it so plainly includes the relativities of taste, cultural oddities, individual allergies, and requirements imposed by climate and available resources. Yet it would be a strange food ethic indeed which concluded from that that there is no real difference between food and poison, between a nourishing diet and starvation, and that there are no objective criteria available at all, since differences of taste occur, which is precisely the sort of reasoning utilized by proponents of absolute subjectivism in ethics.

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[14]*Science and the Modern World,* 136. Cf. pp. 255-7.

[15]*Religion in the Making* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1926), p. 152.

[16]Suggested by Epicurus' dictum: "The beginning and the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; even wisdom and culture must be referred to his." (*Fragments,* no. 59) Note that he does not say "flower," but "root." It is not inconsistent with Epicurus' insistence that he does not mean "the pleasures of profligates," for the stomach teaches as nothing else the ultimate displeasure of gluttony. (*Letter to Menoeceus*)

IV. Structure and Habitat

The concept of God as habitat is certainly not new; it is at least as old as "our dwelling place in all generations." Thoreau wrote of God as our abode, which I take to be the transformation from an alien environing reality to a sustaining one.

> I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, *our abode*, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth, the most remarkable fact which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispese with.—
>
> It doth expand my privacies
> To all, and leave me single in the crowd.[17]

Now our abode — the environing reality, which is our habitat, and which includes our style of dwelling and of acting — is profoundly affected by the view we have of it. Some invalids transform a bleak room in a nursing home into a place of cheerful splendor by an attitude that is one of the marvels of the human spirit. Gene Debs took delight in a flower bed he could see from his prison window. He said to a friend, "there are bars in front, I know — but I never see the bars."[18] The flowers were a part of his abode in a way that they were not for others who saw them, but for whom they were not a part of the vision by which they lived. By way of contrast, there are people who would not be content or find meaning no matter what setting they were placed in. "Nothing is sufficient for him to whom what is sufficient seems little."[19]

This not to say that housing and health are not important or that they are not legitimate concerns. It is merely to assert the old fashioned point that our vision of our habitat is a very important part of where it is and how it is that we live, and, further, that it is stupid to expect meaning to emerge from possessions apart from the cultivation of meaningful envisagement.

Abode is a term that also connotes structure. In the sheer physical sense of house or hut, one could hardly be indifferent to the structural design and its stability. Indeed, if the structure is unsafe, far better to live in a hut than a castle. The more elaborate the furnishings, the more one is mocked when it all comes down, just as if one

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[17] *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1839, pub. 1849) Included in *Walden and Other Writings* (N.Y.: Modern Library, 1937), p. 364.

[18] Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1949), p. 401.

[19] Epicurus, *Fragments*, LXVIII (Vatican Collection).

expects meanings to be provided by possessions, those meanings which can only come from vision, the greater the possessions the more one is mocked. That a structure imposes something of its order on us, that it thwarts and resists us, that its existence requires our cooperation and accomodation is quite obvious. Hence the unending preference many have for religion-as-magic rather than religion-as-vision. Hence, also, however, the deeper appeal of religion-as-vision for those who require both maturity and morality to be incorporated in that vision. For maturity surely includes a coming to terms with the givenness of the natural order and the necessity for patterns imposed by human determination, however much the latter require continual reformation and at times resistance. And ethics, whatever it includes cannot include enthrallment with magic. Indeed there is no greater problem with applied ethics than that so many look for magic as at the heart of achieving character. Not that ethics is a science. Magic is a science, albeit an occult one. Ethics is an art.