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Mysterium Humanum- Wilderness

**An investigation into concepts of Wilderness and its treatment**

I have primarily investigated the ideas and arguments of Thoreau, Leopold, and Callicott in developing my idea of Wilderness. Secondarily I have used The Wilderness Act, Homles Rolston III, and Dave Foreman to provide additional information or contrasting points of view. In my outline I begin with the arguments of Thoreau because he was instrumental in beginning the thought of the environmental movement. Then I progress to Leopold, further developing the importance of the link between humanity and Wilderness. Lastly, I end with Callicott who provides the bulk of my answer to correct the Wilderness idea and handle its conservation. My answer is to change the marketing strategy of Wilderness by calling it Nature. I believe this change for two main reasons: the Nature concept is more accurate in describing the place which we are speaking about when we say “Wilderness” and is more effective in its use than the alternative answer provided by Callicott.

In Thoreau’s essay, *Walking* (1862), he details his argument for the value of Wilderness to the nation of America. Thoreau’s claims that Wilderness is good, that it is necessary to nourish the young spirit of America, and that it is critical to her growth as a nation. Thoreau also goes as so far as to argue against the advancement of civilization in America in regards to “improving” upon the vast array of cultural, spiritual, and moral benefits of Nature. I advocate Thoreau’s passion for Wilderness and agree with him that it is critical to establishing emotional health of individuals as well as a group of individuals. Thoreau’s experience on a mountaintop in Maine, which causes him to move towards a balance of civilization and wilderness is much more reasonable. While I do not discuss his change in my paper I still find his ideas in *Walking* to be useful insofar as they contribute to establishing a baseline of positive feeling towards Wilderness, which I believe contributes to the later efforts of conservation.

Starting from *Walking,* Thoreau begins his advocacy for Wilderness by attacking the “Prince of Darkness” who was with “a worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds”, while the surveyor is the Devil; man, in a particular case, did not see the “heaven [that] had taken place around him” (32). However, I think Thoreau uses the spiritual metaphor to include America as a whole. In another bit of comparison Thoreau said, “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free” (34). In this duality “Eastward”, is Europe and civilization and “westward” is America and the Wilderness. In Thoreau’s actual experience of walking, he directs his attention towards the “man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public* road” so that the activity of “walking” over the beautiful Wilderness that he enjoys shall be instead be illegal (33). While these musings of Thoreau can be taken to mean much more they at least mean that the advancement of civilization upon Wilderness has a decidedly negative affect. I view Thoreau as extreme in his condemnation of land sale and land ownership but I approve his equally passionate approval for Wilderness. I will address the Europe-America dichotomy later but for now will take it simply as an element of Thoreau’s creative prowess in communicating the delightful freedom he feels he enjoys because of the land that surrounds him.

The next step in Thoreau’s argument is the unique quality of the American Wilderness. In referring back to the quote “Eastward … westward I go free” I find it useful to imagine that Thoreau is specifically indicating the expansion of Manifest Destiny in the United States, thus making the case for a specifically American Wilderness to be more valuable than its European counterpart. This claim is further supported when Thoreau claims, “heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold intesner” and that “these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar” (35,36). Here, Thoreau’s poetic claims extend beyond a simple moral goodness claim to include a potentially better spirituality, often equated with morality, and increased intellectual potential. Spirituality is distinguished by its focus on the more mystical aspects of religion which I feel can be more adequately summed up in Thoreau’s “poetry” than “religion”.

While I am not sure whether Thoreau’s poetic experience necessitates a claim for the American land termed as Wilderness to be better, I can’t help but feel myself delightfully joining in with him in voracious agreement because America’s Wilderness feels greater than what we could imagine of any other country’s so that it must be the best. And because of our great Wilderness we then could rise in correlation with the greatness of our natural environment. Next would come the importance of Thoreau’s claims in respect to their predicted impact upon the actual American nation. However, I think that Thoreau’s explicit argument for the potential greatness of America simply based upon the quality of her Wilderness is absolutely ridiculous. It based upon the idea that the collective experience of men in a nation determines whether it achieves greatness or fails. However, I do not think there is a necessary connection between achieving international dominance in a prolonged measurement of time say, 200 to 300 years, and sustaining the link between Wilderness and man.

Leopold may go even further than Thoreau by claiming that the spirit of the Wilderness is the very quality, which makes America American. I support Leopold’s advancement of the connection between the American spirit and Wilderness insofar as it functions to preserving the land called Wilderness. But I disagree with the concept of Leopold’s Wilderness insofar as it is the idea itself. But first it is necessary to start by defining Leopold’s definition of Wilderness.

Leopold asserts four criteria in his discussion of Wilderness. First, he asserts that the area termed Wilderness is a resource of certain social values and that the value of Wilderness varies with its location (76). For example Wilderness in the northern region of Russia, “Siberia” would be less value to us than one in “our Lake states” (Leopold, 76). Thirdly, Wilderness lies between “non-reproducible resources like minerals, and the reproducible resources like forests” (Leopold, 76). Fourth, Wilderness can exist in all sorts of degrees from small weeds growing in a parking lot to vast tracts of preserved land. And almost as an afterthought he adds, “it is idle to discuss wilderness areas if they are to be left subject to forests fires, or wide open to abuse” (Leopold, 77). I disagree with his point on fires because sometimes forest fires are part of the natural land processes. For example, fires start up in California nearly every summer. In fact Andruas-Pompa and Kuas claims that forest fires could have been a method of Indian cultivation of Wilderness (302). Leopold’s contribution to Wilderness in terms of qualifying its use to people is a big shift from the thought of Thoreau. It starts a shift in the thinking on Wilderness from imaginative and experience-based to calculative and empirically based.

In Leopold’s mind Wilderness is as akin to the American spirit as it is to Thoreau. Leopold asks of Wilderness, “Shall we now exterminate the very thing that made us American”(78). He essentially says that when canoe travel exists only in a backyard pond of a cottage the serious element of canoe travel will have died as well as a corresponding serious element of the exploratory nature of the American spirit (Leopold, 83). For Leopold, along with Thoreau, an intimate physical relationship with the Wilderness is necessary to preserve the American spirit. I disagree with Leopold that serious canoe travel is necessary to sustain a serious element of the American spirit. While it is sad that man may lose the experience of canoe travel, mankind achieved more by his exploration of the moon. This adventure would have been considered impossible when Leopold wrote this. And according to Live5News.com now that this new frontier has been breached, there is now a group of volunteers in the process of breaching the frontier of a new planet, Mars. No, I firmly disagree with Leopold’s assertion that the seriousness of American adventure is destroyed with his specific understanding of a serious physical exploration but I think that there is a refocus and refinement of our exploration to greater ends.

Next, I would like to demonstrate how Leopold felt that Wilderness was being currently encroached upon or would be in danger of being encroached upon. I would like to begin with a modified version of Leopold’s question: which creatures are we. Are we the “rational beings with self-directed evolution” or “the potato bug” threatening to wipe out the very resources that preserve us (Leopold, 78)? He cites the decrease of Wilderness areas in Arizona and New Mexico, from six areas of a half a million acres to “one area of half a million acres” (Leopold, 80). Leopold is also concerned that the areas designated wilderness areas are only off limits to the exploitation of man because they contain few resources to exploit (81). In conclusion of his assessment of the oncoming problem of losing wilderness, he recognizes that the “motor-tourist business” is the cause for the degradation of these potential Wilderness areas (Leopold, 82). Leopold correctly notes that the advancement of the park service system to accommodate motor-tourism is the primary drive in the decrease of set-aside wilderness areas. These advancements in culture pose a threat to the Wilderness that is essential to the American spirit. So, I agree and will follow Leopold’s reasoning as he offers an alternative recreational substitute to motor-tourism, which he believes is a wiser investment.

Leopold’s idea is called the land use idea. It is predicated upon the belief that Wilderness can be preserved under the guise of being used for “the ends of sport” (79). He believes that sports as understood in today’s modernity, football for example, are forms of man’s “physical instinct” that continued that the experience of a physical confrontation (Leopold, 79). Specifically in Wilderness areas he calls for the continuation of this instinct that also led to hunting and fishing for sport in newly set aside “public hunting grounds” (Leopold, 82). He also provides well for a more serene experience by setting aside “wild-life sanctuaries” (Leopold, 83). While I am not sure that this does all the work necessary to preserve the qualities which make Wilderness a Wilderness, I still think that this is a huge advancement beyond the preying of Wilderness areas by corporate institutions. Leopold is also concerned that the U.S. experience could be as commercialized as the European experience of Wilderness, which feels more like a picnic than a serious adventure. Leopold’s idea is therefore predicated at least as much upon the positive increase of an individual’s experience as he is in increasing the economic use. I find that Leopold’s case is best summed up his phrasing that the “rocks and rills and templed hills of this America are something more than economic materials” (84). While I certainly agree with Leopold’s designation of the areas of Wilderness for the purpose of sustainably preserving them, I am not sure as to the degrees and distinctions upon which he establishes designations for Wilderness. Or even what these designations are to be and whether Wilderness is a useful term for these areas. However further on in my paper I find better definitions for what I would want to term these areas.

The Wilderness Act, passed in 1964, was a landmark step in institutionalizing the preservation of Wilderness. While I disagree with the ideology that Wilderness can be simply defined and summed up in the terms that are laid out by Congress, I heartily approve the action that ensures movement towards protecting the land termed Wilderness. Also, I foresee that some problems may develop in the integrity of Wilderness areas due to certain, practical allocations for the examination of mineral and private land claims. So, I think that the legislation allows for too many legal loopholes in an area that is supposed to be “where man himself is a visitor and does not remain” (88th Congress, 121). Notwithstanding my reservations, this legislation includes basic necessities involved in a definition of Wilderness. The allocation of physical boundaries and human relations with Wilderness are vital in understanding the changing thought-processes towards Wilderness and the methodologies we as humans use in our relationship with it.

The dialogue between Callicott and his critics is notable because the interaction between the differing definitions on Wilderness, really whether we should call “Wilderness” wilderness at all, and the projected consequences of such are integral in building my own ideas of how the issue ought to be approached. First it is necessary to begin with Callicott’s essay *The Wilderness Idea Revisited* (1991).

Callicott believes that thinking of Wilderness in today’s dichotomy of preservation or exploitation is a bad idea. He says Leopold advocated for something more in man’s relationship with Wilderness. Callicott offers his own view of the current idea of Wilderness in a devastating three-point critique of the current Wilderness idea: first it is reliant upon ideas that do not have any basis in evolution, it is “woefully ethnocentric”, and it ignore the processes of ecological and evolutionary nature upon the environment with they are involved (348).

This critique opens up the potential for discussion into the validity of Wilderness as defined by placing it under Darwinian ideas of science. Callicott’s first point is based upon the idea of man’s involvement within nature as only another species. While I still remain uncertain as to whether Wilderness the right term for these areas, I think this point is useful in terms of understanding man’s day-to-day effect on an environment so humanity’s entirety can be coherently understood as a subset of its natural relations to other species.

His second point focuses on the ethnocentricity of the concept of Wilderness. He asserts that the Western viewpoint holds the achievements of the white ethnic group over that of the Native Americans. The knowledge that there were ten million to fifteen million Indians living in Meso-America at the time of Columbus’ original rival seems to make it likely that the Indians in that region had a notable effect upon the Wilderness landscape. This would also challenge the government term, “untrammeled by man” in regards to properly viewing the American landscape as “[trammeled] by man” (Callicott, 121). I think that Callicott’s points on ethnocentrism are certainly valid in discussing the validity of the idea of Wilderness.

His third point focuses on the subtleties of ecology and evolution. The problem with the Wilderness idea is that it is based upon the idea that if Wilderness is untouched by man then it will remain in a relatively stable state of health. However, the disappearance of large predators, the bear and the wolf, from most of the Wilderness preservation lands in America suggests otherwise (Callicott, 354). In addition, Callicott questions whether invasive species introduced by humans on the landscape really must be negative, by saying that the processes of nature, which have been operating with humans as part of the environment, are constantly changing anyways. And he implies by this logic that human acted change on the environment can be positive. I certainly find his points on the disappearance of large predators persuasive in regards to the stability claim of the Wilderness idea. And I find the point regarding invasive species interesting. So, I think in regards to the processes of ecology and evolution Callicott is right to challenge the current Wilderness idea.

Callicott formalizes his idea for human led interaction with Wilderness via the idea of sustainable development. While this sounds eerily similar to Leopold’s earlier idea of land use and dangerously similar to Thoreau’s imagery of the Devil land surveyor, Callicott argues that the basis of his idea comes from Leopold’s later idea of land management via instituting farmsteads for a sustainable management of America’s land. Before building upon Leopold’s idea of a farmstead Callicott presents some recent evidence of successful human-nature relationships. Callicott notes the species increase of species in the Indian inhabited Kitowak settlement compared to the A’al Waipia “bird sanctuary” count of only thirty-two (356). This remarkable difference provides reasonable evidence that a human presence can have a positive result on the ecological structure of an environment (356). Callicott urges a plan to create large areas of Wilderness. He says that large tracts of Wilderness must be set aside and sustainably used by humans. He starts with the already set aside Wilderness areas and suggests expanding them. Certain roads could then connect these Wilderness tracts that animals could move between the Wilderness areas to increase the migration and gene diversification within these areas. These could increase the production of the natural resources which man is currently exploiting in a less productive method. Calicott also suggests a large-scale project to radically change ranching in the West by “ripping out unnecessary roads, a massive restoration of native wildlife populations, and conversion of cowboys to airborn” cowboys (361). These suggestions sound very unpractical and an unlikely action for the government to take immediately unless a dire situation is imposed upon them. It is unfortunate that the brilliant points he had about the idea of Wilderness would struggle to transition to government policy.

Now I will begin to cover Holmes Rolston III. Rolston attacks a number of Calicott’s concepts about Wilderness, asserting that his own do not exclude the ideas of evolution as outlined by Darwin. The primary idea Rolston challenges in Calicott’s points on the ethnocentrism of the Wilderness idea evolve from the claim that the change Indians may or may not have asserted on the natural processes of the environment are not permanent changes to the ecological system. He quotes Callicott’s that “no doubt that most New World ecosystems were in robust health”(Rolston, 377). He says this indicates the Indians did not exact a change that prevented the systems already functioning inside the ecosystems from reasserting their regenerative effects upon the environment. Additionally, he questions the point raised by Callicott and earlier by Gomez-Pompa and Kaus of calling Indian brushfires a uniquely human asserted change on the landscape. He says that the kind of fires that seriously alter the landscape are dependent upon the conditions already set in place and that these natural disasters which seriously alter the landscape would likely be equally effected by lightning strikes as human started fires (Rolston, 377). Therefore, Rolston concludes that the effect Indians had on the Wilderness could be considered negligible, even if they inhabited the land before Europeans arrived. I find Rolston’s criticism of Callicott’s claims particularly of the Indians effect on the ecosystems, in their purported ability to recover, troubles the strength of Callicott’s ethnocentric point. Additionally, I find his claim on the lighting-fire to be persuasive because I can remember times where there have been large-scale fires as a result of drought in the present day. I think Rolston’s strongest argument is actually based upon the usefulness of the Wilderness concept in that “If Callicott has his way… soon there will be less wilderness” (384).

Callicott’s reaffirms the difference between his ideas and the current Wilderness idea. Later, he says, “Eastward migrating pedestrian Homo sapiens found a genuinely pristine and virgin wilderness” (Callicott, 393). However, he also raises another point that these same humans also were present as “two species of elephant and 30 other… large mammals were also here when the spearmen appeared” by citing H.E. Wright and D.G. Frey (392). The first quote causes me to reconsider my definition of Wilderness: as to whether it ceases to be a Wilderness the moment man’s foot touches it or once man asserts his created processes over the processes of nature. I feel that Natives’ migration took the status of Wilderness away from the currently termed Wilderness. Callicott’s reaffirmation of the biotic change of Wilderness seems to sure up the argument for the irreversible ecological and evolutionary effect of human beings. This claim Callicott successfully proves by the extinction of species, specifically species that could have been considered reasonable threats to the migrating Natives. This point also potentially implies a larger dominance of the Native over the environment he inhabited than previously supposed. While Callicott defends his criticism of the “wilderness *idea”* very well, he leaves Rolston’s last charge unanswered, an argument which is more fully developed by Foreman (387).

One argument principally ignored by Callicott is the potential use of his new idea of Wilderness. Foreman extends an argument in *Wilderness Areas for Real* (1998) that Calicott’s ideas won’t work in preserving Wilderness areas (396). He says we need the Wilderness idea because “every reform measure… gets gutted in practice by agencies controlled by extractive industries” (Foreman, 398). This is a man who has “time in the trenches, fighting Forest timber sales, going toe-to-toe with ranchers and loggers … lobbying members of Congress” (Foreman, 398). In short, Foreman makes a bunch of emotional, experience-based arguments as to why the Wilderness idea is essential to immediately preserve Wilderness. He believes this is critical to influencing the important parties to preserve the actual Wilderness. However, perhaps most importantly, he approves Callicott’s plan, noting that his ideas are on the right track but that he is concerned others might use his ideas to the detriment of Wilderness areas.

In Callicott’s paper *Should Wilderness Areas Become Biodiversity Reserves* (1996) he makes the argument that Wilderness areas ought to be considered biodiversity reserves. Callicott reiterates much of his previous ideas on Wilderness and attacks Thoreau’s moving ideas of Wilderness as misleading. He understands that his critics are concerned that the real enemies of the environmental movement might misuse his work to manipulate and destroy Wilderness areas. He attempts to solve this by saying that he replaces the idea of Wilderness with biodiversity reserves. Callicott says that the zoos we have had are biodiversity reserves. He also tries to say that zoos could institute policies that place the health of the animals above that of the personal experience, but he doesn’t really address the issue of park attendance as a result of the potential decline in a visitor’s experience. Finally he says Wilderness areas could be expanded with this mindset and that action on these biodiversity reserves could be sustainably managed. Callicott’s ideas are solid and his reasoning is sound in regards to his biodiversity reserve. However, he does not have a convincing strategy to market his idea to the public like Foreman who has experience convincing the proper parties to act on ideas.

In relating my own idea of Wilderness to those of whom I have been researching, I need to provide a brief summary of the usefulness of their ideas. While many of Thoreau’s claims are far-fetched in relation to man’s nature and his relationship with Wilderness he hits a bulls-eye on its importance relative to the American spirit. Leopold is important in his development because he continues to recognize the connection between Wilderness and the preservation of the American spirit. In addition to this he also makes several important bounds in actually preserving the land termed Wilderness so that it may continue to exist. The American spirit can also be understood as a man’s mythic relationship to Wilderness. While I cannot convincingly prove this, it can also function as man’s emotional relationship to Wilderness that will work just as well. In preview to Callicott’s arguments I would like to restate the question Leopold asked of mankind in a different format: are Callicott and those who agree with him “rational creatures” or “potato bugs”(78). I ask this in reference to the link between man’s emotions and Wilderness because Callicott perfectly hits how areas termed Wilderness ought to be managed and thought about, but he neglects the emotional needs of man. He forgets that a biodiversity reserve is nothing but a scientific term to an average American. I think, along with Rolston and Foreman, there is a political danger in advertising these areas as biodiversity reserves. It makes Wilderness vulnerable to exploitation by clever companies and greedy Congressmen. Furthermore, Callicott’s answer to the concerns of Foreman by advocating political optimism is unconvincing. The status quo rarely changes in the hands of power. For this reason I suggest a more marketable term, perhaps Nature could be a proper revision of the term for Wilderness. It preserves an emotional link between man and the land, allowing it to be publicly advocated. Additionally it helps solve many of the good points that Callicott made about the flaw with the idea of Wilderness. Therefore the new concept could simply be termed Nature.

In my reasoning, the concept of Nature is a better concept than the Wilderness concept or the biodiversity reserve. Firstly, it allows the points issued by Callicott to stand. All the points that he made about the effect Native Americans had on Wilderness can be continued within the concept of Nature. I feel as Callicott does that the baggage induced with the Wilderness concept is too much to overcome. However, I also believe Foreman speaks persuasively to flaws within Callicott’s replacement of the Wilderness idea. I don’t think Callicott’s arguments for the transition of his concept to the political system are convincing. I think that Nature sounds as publicly appealing as Wilderness, answering Foreman’s concerns. I also think that any argument made for degrees of Wilderness transitions smoothly to the concept of Nature. I am not sure what to term the various distinctions of the Nature idea, but I know that we need them. Regardless, the Wilderness concept can be replaced with the concept of Nature, improving upon the idea and sustaining the ability to preserve the land.

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