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~ Chapter One ~

THE WARSAW CEMETERY AND THE
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I.

The trees are all around me. I could be in a forest, yet I can hear the sounds of traffic on Okopowa Street on the other side of the wall. Inside the Jewish Cemetery of Warsaw all is quiet. It is October 1995, fifty years after the end of the Second World War, and I have come to witness some of the remains of Jewish history in Eastern Europe, the landscape of the Holocaust. There is a light rain and fog. In the grayness of the day, the mist and the shadows prevent my eyes from seeing deep into the cemetery. What I can see are the trees and the underbrush, lush and green, growing up and over the scattered and crooked gravestones. One main walkway and a few paths that branch out from it have been cleared, so that visitors can view several hundred of the tombstones. Another open path leads to a clearing. It is a clearing of tombstones, not of trees, for it is the mass grave of the Jews who died in the Warsaw ghetto before the deportations to the Treblinka death camp began in July 1942. The mass grave takes the form of a meadow under a canopy of tree branches. Gravestones ring the meadow as a broken border fence, but the center of the clearing is covered with grass. Dozens of memorial candles flicker, remaining lit despite the dampness and the light rain. The beauty of this mass grave surprises and shocks me. Here is the physical incarnation of irony. This cemetery, a monument to the destructive hatred of the Nazi Holocaust, is extraordinarily beautiful. Filled with a vibrant, unchecked growth of trees and other vegetation, the cemetery demonstrates the power of nature to re-assert itself in the midst of human destruction and human evil.

The next day I travel to Lublin, near the Ukrainian border. This is a two-hour drive from Warsaw, through endless flat farmland where Polish farmers still use horses to plow the fields. It is harvest season, and the car slows occasionally to pass a truck piled high with sugar beets. Our destination is Majdanek, the Nazi death camp lying three kilometers

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from the center of Lublin. Majdanek fills a treeless meadow stretching as far as the eye can see. I stand at the entrance gate and observe, about a thousand yards in the distance, the chimney of the crematorium.

Unlike Treblinka or the more famous Auschwitz-Birkenau, the camp at Majdanek was built near a major urban center; indeed Lublin would supply about five thousand of the victims murdered in the camp.¹ Majdanek was not hidden in the countryside. It is easy to imagine the smoke from the crematorium drifting into the heart of downtown Lublin. Likewise, it is hard to believe that the people of Lublin did not know what was happening at the camp. Lublin was the headquarters for Operation Reinhard, the plan to kill the entire Jewish population of the conquered land of Poland. Majdanek itself was first established as a slave labor camp in 1940, but its gas chambers began operating in November 1942. Approximately 360,000 people were killed at Majdanek—200,000 were Jews and the rest were non-Jewish Poles and Soviet prisoners of war. They died by the gas chamber, by shootings, and by overwork, disease, and malnutrition. In one day alone, November 3, 1943, 18,000 prisoners were shot and killed, their bodies piled into open ditches near the crematorium. Over 800,000 shoes were found at the camp when it was liberated in July 1944 by the advancing Russian army. Majdanek was the first of the Nazi death camps to be liberated, the first to be seen by the Allied forces and the Western media. Most importantly, because the camp was liberated so early in the last year of the war, the SS command structure had not yet developed a plan to deal with camps that fell into Allied control. Unlike the camps farther west that were liberated later, Majdanek was not destroyed by the retreating German forces. Although many of the wooden barracks buildings have deteriorated through natural decay, the camp as a whole exists today as it did in 1944, relatively intact.² It remains as a monument to human evil and destruction.

I stand in the small open courtyard a few dozen yards beyond the main entrance gate. On this spot the selections of arriving prisoners were made—who would live and work in the camp, who would be killed immediately. To my right is the gas chamber, a wood-shingled building, painted brown, with a sign that reads “Disinfection Bath” in German. Behind the gas chamber were the open pits for burning corpses, a supplement to the ovens of the crematorium building at the other end of

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the camp. On my left is a row of barracks, used as storerooms and work areas when the camp was in operation. These unheated and dimly lit buildings now house museum exhibits. Beyond them is the main camp, divided into several sections or compounds. Each section consists of two rows of barracks facing a wide open parade ground. I enter the gate that permits entry through a double row of barbed wire and wooden fencing and walk through the parade ground of the first section of barracks, what was once the women's compound. I head out onto a road along the perimeter of the camp, a road that leads to the crematorium and the site of the November 1943 mass shooting. The camp is virtually empty of visitors. As in Warsaw the day before, there is a light rain and mist, and the autumnal air is cold, signaling the arrival of winter.

As I stand near the crematorium, overlooking the landscape of the concentration camp, my mind struggles to comprehend two opposing perceptions. The death factory of Majdanek is too beautiful. The green grass of the parade ground suggests a college campus, not a site of slave labor and mass executions. Is it possible to stand here in this grassy meadow and imagine the mud, the dirt, the smell—the unrelenting gray horror of the thousands of prisoners in their ill-fitting striped suits standing at roll calls? Is it possible to imagine the perpetually gray sky, filled with smoke and ash from the crematorium and the burning pits near the entrance of the camp? Perhaps it would be better to see Majdanek in the middle of the winter when one is not overwhelmed by the color of the green grass. As in the Warsaw cemetery the day before, nature prevents me from seeing, understanding, and feeling the true dimensions of the remnants of the evil that confronts me.

The experience of these two places—the cemetery and the death camp—raises questions for me about the healing power of nature in its relationship with human activity. And thinking of the healing power of nature in these historically unique situations leads me, in turn, to raise questions about both the ontological and the normative status of nature: what is nature, and why and how is it valuable? Can a study of the Holocaust reveal any truths about nature and the environmental crisis that surrounds us in the contemporary world? Can the study of nature and natural processes teach us anything about the evil of human genocide? Can the study of genocide teach us anything about the human-induced destruction of the natural world, what is sometimes called the

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process of “ecocide,” in an obvious attempt to equate it with genocide? These are not subjects that permit facile comparisons and analogies. Generally we study the Holocaust and the environmental crisis from different perspectives, with different attitudes and purposes. Holocaust studies and environmental philosophy are not generally thought to be compatible subjects for analysis and discussion. Yet the comparison may be helpful; indeed it may be full of profound meaning. Again, I return to a consideration of Anne Frank’s tree. With this tree we can see how a natural entity can be a symbol of hope in a world that has become overwhelmingly evil, as it was for Anne. The evil that this tree confronts is the evil of domination. Perhaps the idea of domination can be used to link together an analysis of the Holocaust and the destruction of the natural world. Perhaps this comparison then can point us in the direction of developing a harmonious relationship with both the natural world and our fellow human beings.

II.

I want to emphasize the importance of my visit to the actual sites described above, and indeed, to those places I will describe in subsequent chapters. This book contains more than a philosophical argument. I could not have developed the ideas set forth in these pages through the typical philosophical methods of argument, analysis, example, and rebuttal. The lived experience of these places not only colors my ideas but also completely informs them. Indeed, this book is a written expression of my attempt to understand the physical experience of these Holocaust sites, to situate these experiences in the context of my philosophical thoughts about the meaning of the environmental crisis and the practice of human domination.

Why should I even try to connect these two areas of inquiry? Why think about the environmental crisis and the Holocaust in terms of one another? Is there a meaningful relationship between human ideas of the natural world and the concepts of domination and genocide? The Nazis thought so. As we shall see in much more detail in later chapters, the reconstruction and development of Polish farmland under scientific principles of management was one of the major goals of German settlement in the conquered lands east of Germany. Quoting from a contemporary record, architectural historian Robert Jan van Pelt describes

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a trip through Poland in 1940 undertaken by Heinrich Himmler, the Reichskommissar for the resettlement of the German people, and, arguably, the second most powerful man in the Nazi hierarchy after Hitler himself. Himmler and his personal friend Henns Johst stand in a Polish field, holding the soil in their hands, and dream of the great agricultural and architectural projects to come: the re-creation of German farms and villages, the replanting of trees, shrubs, and hedgerows to protect the crops, and even the alteration of the climate by increasing dew and the formation of clouds.³ As part of this plan to Germanize the landscape, there would have to be, of course, an “ethnic cleansing” of the region. The Polish people, both Gentile and Jewish, would have to be moved elsewhere or otherwise eliminated so that a German agricultural utopia could be developed. Fortunately for the realization of German policy goals, Himmler, as leader of the SS, was also in command of all operations that would produce this ethnic cleansing. And so we are introduced to the idea that the control of nature—in the re-development of the landscape, including the climate, to create a German agricultural homeland—was a central part of the Nazi plan. The domination of nature and humanity are linked together.

The domination of nature, of course, has long been a goal of Western civilization. It remains so, even today. As I have argued in my earlier work,⁴ the primary goal of the Enlightenment project of the scientific understanding of the natural world is to control, manipulate, and modify natural processes for the increased satisfaction of human interests. Humans want to live in a world that is comfortable—or at least in a world that is not hostile to human happiness and survival. Thus the purpose of science and technology is to comprehend, predict, control, and modify the physical world in which we are embedded. This purpose is easy to understand when we view technological and industrial projects that use nature as a resource for economic development. Yet the irony is that the same purpose, human control, motivates much of environmentalist policy and practice.

As examples, let us consider the arguments of two writers on the theory and practice of environmental policy: Martin Krieger’s call for artificial wilderness areas that will be pleasing to human visitors, and Chris Maser’s plans for re-designing forests on the model of sustainable agriculture.⁵ Maser is an environmentalist and Krieger is not; yet their

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views on environmental policy are strikingly similar. Maser was once considered a spokesperson and leader of enlightened environmental forestry practices, but his goal is to manage forests in such a way as to maximize the wide variety of human interests in forest development: sustainable supplies of timber, human recreation, and spiritual and aesthetic satisfaction. Krieger is a public policy analyst interested in the promotion of social justice. His goal is to develop an environmental policy consistent with the maximization of human economic, social, and political benefits. Thus he argues that education and advertising can reorder public priorities, so that the environments that people want and use will be those available at the lowest cost. Natural environments need not be preserved if artificial ones can produce more human happiness at a lower cost.

What ties together views such as Krieger's and Maser's is their thoroughgoing anthropocentrism: i.e., human interests, satisfactions, goods, and happiness are the central and fundamental goals of public policy and human action. This anthropocentrism is, again, not surprising. Since the Enlightenment, at least, human concerns—rather than the interests of God—have been the central focus of almost all progressive human activities, projects, and social movements. The institutions of human civilization are planned, organized, and structured to improve the lives of human beings. Although methods may differ, and the set of people that is the primary object of this concern for improvement may differ, the central anthropocentric focus is consistent regardless of ideology or social position or political power. Humanity is in the business of creating and maximizing human good.

Anthropocentrism as a worldview easily leads to policies and practices of the domination of nature, even when the domination is not articulated. Indeed, in much of progressive environmental policy, the domination of nature by and for human interests is not even recognized or understood. Environmental policy often conceives of the natural world as a nonhuman "other" to be controlled, manipulated, modified, or destroyed in the pursuit of some human good. As a nonhuman other, nature is understood as merely a resource for the development and maximization of human interests; as a nonhuman other, nature has no valid interests or good of its own. Consider the most influential and popular environmental idea of the last three decades: sustainable development.

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Since the 1987 Brundtland report, which defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” the policies and activities of governments, industries, NGOs, communities, and even individuals have aspired to follow, or at least pay lip service to, this basic idea. But sustainable development is an idea that is highly anthropocentric in character, and it leads to policies and actions that privilege human concerns over the wellbeing of the natural world. The basic concept in the Brundtland definition is that future generations of human beings are to be able to meet their needs, to satisfy their interests. So at a basic level sustainable development is an economic idea that foresees continual economic growth (i.e., development) through time, so that present human populations as well as future human populations maintain an acceptable economic lifestyle. Yet it is also supposed to consider the overall quality of life for present-day and future humans beyond mere economic wellbeing. The sustainable economic development is supposed to be balanced against environmental degradation, for the problems created by the destruction of nature (e.g., pollution, global warming, etc.) will have serious negative impacts on the human quality of life. Thus, sustainable development calls for the furtherance of human welfare and economic wealth but at the same time the conservation of nature and natural resources. But the reason or motivation for maintaining a healthy and functioning natural environment, at least as a long-term resource base, is the continued production of goods and benefits for human beings. Sustainable development is thus an expression of an anthropocentric worldview, for its central focus is the welfare of human beings, now and in the future. Nature is merely the nonhuman other that is used to produce this human wellbeing.

Another environmental policy, ecological restoration, can also be considered to be an expression of anthropocentrism. A thoroughgoing analysis and criticism of ecological restoration is one of the major themes of this book, and I will develop this argument more fully below in this chapter and in Chapter Three, but for now we should note that the restoration of degraded ecosystems to a semblance of their original states is a policy that is permeated with anthropocentric ideology. Under this policy, natural ecosystems that have been harmed by human activity are restored to a state that is more pleasing to the current human popula-

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tion. A marsh that had been landfilled is re-flooded to restore wetland acreage; strip-mined hills are replanted to create flowering meadows; acres of farmland are subjected to a controlled burn and replanting with wildflowers and shrubs to re-create the oak savanna of the pre-European American plains. We humans thus achieve three simultaneous goals: we create an improved ecosystem or natural area that is more in line with our current interests and desires; we relieve our guilt for the earlier destruction of natural systems by creating a functional replacement; and we demonstrate our human power—the power of science and technology—over the natural world.⁶

But the domination of nonhuman nature need not be the only result of an anthropocentric worldview. The ideology of anthropocentric domination may also extend to the oppression of other human beings, those conceived as a philosophical “other,” as nonhuman or subhuman. As C. S. Lewis wrote seventy years ago, at the end of the Second World War, “what we call man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.” The reason that this exercise of power is considered to be justifiable is that the subordinate people are not considered to be human beings: “they are not men at all; they are artefacts.”⁷ It is here that we can see the connection between the domination of nature that is manifested in the environmental crisis of the contemporary world and the domination of humanity that was manifested through the genocidal policies of the Holocaust. Anthropocentrism does not convert automatically into a thoroughgoing humanism, wherein all humans are treated as equally worthwhile. As we know from history, for example, the idea of human slavery has been justified from at least the time of the ancient Greeks (and probably long before into prehistory) by designating the slave class as less than human (as in Aristotle’s *Politics*⁸). In the twentieth century, the evaluation of other people as subhuman finds its clearest expression in the Nazi ideology concerning the Jews (and the Slavs and Romany), but we find its echoes in the contemporary world, be it the ethnic civil war in the former Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda (where the Tutsis were described as “cockroaches”), or the hatred of the Palestinians by some extreme right-wing Israelis. We generally recognize that any form of ethnocentrism or racism can easily lead to prejudice, oppression, and domination regarding a denigrated class, but the same is true

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of anthropocentrism in general. The oppressed class—be it a specific race or religious group, or even animals or natural entities—is simply denied admittance to the elite center of value-laden beings.⁹ From within anthropocentrism, only humans have value and only human interests and goods need to be pursued. But who or what counts as a human is a question that cannot be answered from within anthropocentrism; this question requires an external standpoint to determine the normative and ontological status of any entity or set of entities. And the answer to this question will determine the likely extent of the practice of domination.

We have thus arrived at a provisional answer to the question that began this section. Environmental philosophy and Holocaust studies are not only compatible but they are also mutually reinforcing lines of inquiry. The ideas of anthropocentrism and domination tie together a study of the Holocaust and the contemporary environmental crisis. Whether we consider genocide, the destruction of a human people, or ecocide, the destruction of natural systems and entities, we find the justification that the victims are less than human, that they exist outside the primary circle of value.

III.

The resurgence of trees in the Warsaw cemetery and the lush green grass of the meadow at the Majdanek death camp serve as catalysts for rethinking the relationships among nature, humanity, and the practice of domination. In these places, one can describe metaphorically the processes of nature as a kind of healing, a soothing of the wounds wrought by the evil of the Holocaust. Does nature, over time, make everything better? Can we say that dominated and oppressed entities are saved—redeemed—by the ordinary processes of the natural world as they correct the evil that humans perpetrate? Does nature have this power? And if it does, what are the implications for the way in which humanity acts in relationship to the natural world?

First, we should note an objection to this entire line of analysis. One might argue that in thinking of nature as having a redeeming power over human evils, we are, in part, treating nature as if it possessed a kind of intentional activity. But nature is not a rational subject. Nature makes no decisions, rational or otherwise. To think that nature makes acts either rationally or irrationally is to make what philosophers call a

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“category-mistake”—it is to apply the wrong concept to a situation or entity. If the lush vegetation hides the horrors of Majdanek this is not the result of any natural plan, but merely the effects of natural processes in their normal operations. According to this objection, we should be wary of anthropomorphizing natural processes, of being misled by metaphor and analogy.

This objection serves as an important warning to the analysis that follows in this book. Nature has no intentions—and no other thoughts, desires, wants, or needs. Nevertheless, I do believe—as I noted briefly in my Preface—that nature can be considered to be analogous to a human subject. Human actions can benefit or harm natural processes in ways similar to the benefits and harms produced for other humans, for human institutions, and for nonhuman living beings. Moreover, nature does act in predictable ways similar to a thinking being. As Colin Duncan has claimed, “While Nature is certainly not a person ... it does have some of the attributes of a Hegelian subject. It can be both victim-like and agent-like.”¹⁰ Most important for my thesis, we can consider nature as the subject of an ongoing history that can be interfered with or destroyed by human action. From the perspective of normative axiology (value theory), nature develops in ways similar to human subjects—the continuous processes of nature produce good and bad consequences for itself and for other entities. Morally and axiologically, then, nature can be considered to be equivalent to a subject. Without anthropomorphizing nature—without attributing to it the emotions, feelings, desires, and rational will of human subjects—we can understand that it is not merely a passive object to be manipulated and used by humanity.¹¹

Nature, in fact, acts upon human beings, human institutions, and the products of human culture in powerful ways. What we call natural disasters, such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods, are the prime examples of events in which natural forces impact humanity. But ordinary weather, small variations in climate, disease organisms, the migration of species, and even the rotation of the earth are also activities of nature—natural processes—that affect human life. Elsewhere I have categorized this type of natural activity as nature’s imperialism over humanity, for it has a parallel structure to the basic kind of human imperialism over other humans, as well as to the human imperialism over nature. Imperialism is a form of domination, in which one entity uses, takes advantage of,

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controls, or otherwise exerts force over another. If we consider nature as both a possible subject and object of imperialism, then we can think of nature as exerting its power—attempting to dominate—humanity, just as we can think of humanity attempting to dominate nature.¹²

But my experiences in the Warsaw cemetery and at Majdanek suggest that nature's domination in these places is benign. Nature appears to heal the wounds of human atrocities, to cover the scarred remains of human evil. Nature here does not appear to exert the oppression of an imperialist. Nature appears to provide the balm to restore the health and goodness of a world disrupted and harmed by the intentional acts of evil human beings. Nature's domination—its resurgence in these realms of human atrocities—serves as the corrective to the effects of human domination, in this case to the oppression and genocide of Eastern European Jewry. Is this an appropriate way to interpret the experiences of these places?

I think not. One objection to viewing nature as a benign healer of human-induced wounds is that such a perspective on nature is yet another expression of an anthropocentric worldview. Rather than use nature as a physical resource for economic purposes, we are here using nature as an emotional resource, to make us feel better about the horrors of human destruction.¹³ We are blinded to the fact that natural processes develop independently from human projects; nature follows its own logic. A forest re-grows after a burn caused by a lightning strike; a tidal marsh is rejuvenated after a storm surge. Nature can and does create new life and new beauty. Yet none of these natural activities are properly described as a "healing," since that characterization implies human intentionality. So the desire to see nature as a healer demonstrates how pervasive is the anthropocentric perspective. We humans seem incapable of viewing the natural world on its own terms, free of the categories and purposes of human life and human institutions.

Even more importantly, the question arises whether or not nature *can* heal these wounds of human oppression. Consider the reverse process, the human attempt to heal the wounds that have been wrought upon nature. We often tend to clean up natural areas polluted or damaged by human activity, such as the Gulf Coast harmed by the BP oil drilling disaster of the spring of 2010. But we also attempt to improve natural areas dramatically altered by natural events, such as a forest damaged

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by a massive brush fire, or a beach suffering severe natural erosion. In most of these cases, human science and technology are capable of making a significant change in the appearance and processes of the natural area. Forests can be replanted, oil is removed from the surface of bays and estuaries, sand and dune vegetation replenish a beach. But are these activities the healing of nature? Has human activity—science and technology—restored nature to a healthy state?

For over twenty-five years I have written essays and book chapters arguing that the answer to this question is a resounding “no.”¹⁴ In Chapter Three, I will delve more deeply into this critique of ecological restoration, answering my critics and pushing the argument into new directions. But for now all that is required is a brief summary argument highlighting the main points of my position. In general, I believe that when humans intentionally modify a natural area they create an artifact, a product of human labor and design. This restored natural area may resemble a wild and unmodified natural system, but it is, in actuality, a product of human thought, the result of human desires and interests. All humanly created artifacts are manifestations of human interests—from computer screens to rice pudding. An ecosystem restored by human activity may appear to be in a different category—it may appear to be an autonomous living system uncontrolled by human thought and action—but it nonetheless exhibits characteristics of human design and intentionality: it is created to meet human interests, to satisfy human desires, and to maximize human good.

Consider again my examples of human attempts to heal damaged natural areas. A forest is replanted to correct the damage of a fire because humans want the benefits of the forest—whether these are timber, a habitat for wildlife, or protection of a watershed. The replanting of the forest by humans is different from a natural re-growth of the forest vegetation, which would take much longer and would likely include different individual plants and species. The forest is replanted because humans want the beneficial results of the mature forest in a shorter time, or with a prescribed population of specific trees and other vegetation. Similarly, the eroded beach is replenished—perhaps with sand pumped from the ocean floor several miles offshore—because the human community does not want to live with the natural status of the beach. The eroded waterfront threatens the oceanfront homes and rec-

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reational beaches. Humanity prefers to restore the human benefits of a fully protected beach. The restored beach will resemble the original, but it will be the product of human technology, a humanly designed artifact for the promotion of human interests.

After these actions of human restoration and modification, what emerges is a nature with a different character than the original. This difference is an ontological difference, that is, a change in the essential qualities of the restored area. A beach that has sand replenished by human technology possesses a different essence than a beach created by natural forces such as wind and tides. A savanna replanted from wildflower seeds and weeds that were collected by human hands has a different essence than grassland that develops on its own. The source, the genesis, of these new areas is different—human-made, technological, artificial. The restored nature is not really nature at all.

A nature “healed” by human action is thus not nature. As an artifact, it is designed to meet human purposes and needs—perhaps even the need for areas that look like a pristine, untouched nature. In using our scientific knowledge and technological power to “restore” natural areas, we actually practice another form of domination. We use our knowledge and power to mold the natural world into a shape that is more amenable to our desires. We oppress the natural processes that function independently of human power; we prevent the autonomous development of the natural world. To believe that we heal or restore the natural world by the exercise of our scientific knowledge and technological power is, at best, a self-deception and, at worst, a rationalization for the continued degradation of nature—for if we are confident that we can heal whatever damage we inflict, we will face no limits to our actions regarding the natural world.

This conclusion has serious implications for the idea with which we began, the idea that nature, conversely, can repair human destruction, that nature can somehow heal the evil that humans perpetuate on the earth. Just as a landscape restored by humans has a different causal history than the original natural system, the re-emergence of nature in a place of human genocide and destruction is based on a series of human events that cannot be erased. The natural vegetation that covers the mass grave in the Warsaw cemetery is not the same as the vegetation that would have grown there if the mass grave had never been dug. The grass and

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trees in the cemetery have a different cause, a different history, that is inextricably linked to the history of the Holocaust. The grassy field in the Majdanek parade ground does not cover and heal the mud and desolation of the death camp—it rather grows from the dirt and ashes of the site’s victims. For anyone who has an understanding of the Holocaust, of the innumerable evils heaped upon an oppressed people by the Nazi regime, the richness of nature cannot obliterate nor heal the horror.

IV.

Rather than think of nature as a force that can heal humanly created R wounds or that can overcome the evils of humanly created oppression and domination, we ought to think of nature as being in need of a liberation of its own. The liberation of nature would seem to be a necessary implication from the idea, introduced above, that nature can be considered to be analogous to a human subject. A subject, after all, can be free or oppressed. Also important would be the connection to the guiding image of this book—Anne Frank’s tree—for in her diary the image of a nature independent of the forces of human evil and destruction is the foundation of her hope for a better world. But what can the “liberation of nature” mean?

In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Herbert Marcuse declared that “nature, too, awaits the revolution!”¹⁵ Nature, in other words, has a possible future free of human domination. Although I do not plan to analyze the work of Marcuse or other critical theorists, I will use this remark as a starting point to consider the meaning of the idea that nature can be liberated, that it can be released from human domination. I choose this pithy remark of Marcuse as a starting point because the field of mainstream environmental ethics has said surprisingly very little about the domination and possible liberation of nature. One classic title, William Leiss’s *The Domination of Nature*, was a study of Francis Bacon and not a treatise on environmental ethics.¹⁶ Perhaps the only sustained discussion of the concepts of liberation and domination in the field of environmental ethics has been in the work of ecofeminist philosophers. At least since 1980, when Carolyn Merchant published *The Death of Nature*, ecofeminist philosophy has emphasized as its primary theme the connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature.¹⁷

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But as early as 1977, John Rodman, with perhaps an ironic eye towards Marcuse's essay, published "The Liberation of Nature?," a critique of both Peter Singer's idea of animal liberation and Christopher Stone's proposal for the establishment of legal rights of natural entities as models of a new environmental consciousness.¹⁸ If nature were to be truly liberated, Rodman argued, we would have to do better than extending utilitarianism to the animal kingdom (following Singer) or granting rights as convenient legal fictions to nonhuman natural objects (following Stone). Taking as his symbolic act of defiance the freeing of captive dolphins, Rodman insisted that we must resist the technological monoculture that is rapidly enveloping the contemporary world.

My use of the concept of domination—and the idea that I take to be its opposite, autonomy—has so far been fundamental to the argument of this book, yet I have used these ideas uncritically. I have been reluctant to enter into any serious metaphysical debates about the meaning of human nature or the nature of nature itself. Yet when I claim that nature should be treated as analogous to a human subject, that nature needs its own revolution of liberation, or that a nature free of human domination should be the primary goal of human activity regarding the natural environment, I open the door for critical questioning about the metaphysical foundations of my position. What is this nature that is analogous to a human subject? What exactly is this autonomous entity that needs to be liberated from the chains of human domination?

The precise locus of my problem concerns the existence and description of nature in itself, the nature of nature. I have been inspired by the vision that Anne Frank had about her chestnut tree, that the autonomy and self-development of nature is to be respected and used as a motivation for human action. For me, in other words, nature is to be treated as a moral subject. But if this vision of nature as an autonomous moral subject is to have any meaning and practical force, then we need some sense of what nature is, in itself, outside the domain of human activity. The problem for a critical philosophical analysis is that nature is only known through human activity, and even more problematic, nature is continually modified by human activity. Thus both epistemologically and ontologically, nature in itself is "our" nature, the nature constructed by human thought and praxis. Can there be a nature that exists in itself, independent of human life, thought, and action? According to Steven

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Vogel, in his book *Against Nature*, the problem of nature in itself is also the problem for critical theorists such as Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas—“how to reconcile an account of knowledge as active and social ... with the ‘materialist’ commitment to a nature independent of the human.”¹⁹ But this problem is more than a problem for critical theory—it is a problem for any philosophy concerned with the human relationship to the natural world. Any environmental philosophy that deals with a robust nonanthropocentrism must have a clear sense of what nonhuman nature is. Any account of environmental ethics that extends moral consideration beyond the boundaries of the human species would seem to require some idea of what nature and natural entities are in themselves, free of human influence and control. We need to know what is good for nature in itself in order to act for this good.

The problem is that we know and understand nature through human categories. For example, we use human conceptions of good to evaluate the processes of nature, the flourishing of natural entities and systems. The human interest in nature is the factor that focuses our perceptions and understanding of the natural world. If nature is understood in this way, it does not appear that it could ever be free of human domination, for the basic domination is epistemological: nature is only known through human thought. For the operation of a nonanthropocentric environmental ethic, or for the existence of an ideal nature independent of humanity that can be used as a source of hope and resistance, we seem to require an idea of a nature that is autonomous, a nature that is analogous to a human subject, so that we can preserve and promote the interests of this nature in itself. But to think of a free and autonomous nature, it seems, means that we must think of a nature that is completely free of human influence, to think of nature in itself, a nature that is outside of all human categories of thought.

But can we know what nature is in itself? Given our post-Kantian understanding of human thought, it seems unreasonable to think that we can know nature in itself, or what Kant called *an sich*. But is knowledge of what Kant termed the noumenal world of nature really required for the development of a nonanthropocentric environmental ethics? Do we need to know the fundamental ontological reality of nature to recognize its existence independent from human institutions and concerns? Perhaps I have approached this problem in the wrong way. Perhaps there is no

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real need for a metaphysical examination of nature as such. Here I want to suggest a pragmatic response to these questions: perhaps we can avoid metaphysical speculations about the nature of nature. Perhaps we can “make do” with the concepts and practices that we have at our disposal as practical moral philosophers.

Let me offer a tentative pragmatic solution to the problem of nature in itself. Is there a nature outside the knowledge and activity of human society that can be a subject unto itself? Is there a nature that can be liberated from human domination? For an answer, let us compare the problem of the liberation of nature with that of the liberation of humans. Given the limits of our epistemology, we do not really know what humans are in themselves either. The Kantian analysis of the knowledge of physical nature—that we can know only the world of phenomena, for the noumenal world is filtered or structured by our human categories of thought—applies to humans in their physical being as well. I do not know other human beings, nor even myself, outside of socially constructed categories. All of my relationships with all individual human beings and all human groups and institutions are mediated by cultural constructs and social roles. And yet in my relationships with other humans and human institutions I can meaningfully strive to end oppression and domination, to aid other human beings in achieving liberation, freedom, and autonomy. I do not require an idea of a human being in itself for a meaningful liberatory praxis.

So what does liberation mean? It does not mean the elimination of all social constructs and categories. A human being does not become liberated when he or she transcends all social and cultural roles, duties, and obligations. Even if this kind of transcendence were possible—which it cannot be—what could it possibly mean? A pure human essence existing outside of all human history, free of all the rules of human social life? The prehistorical natural or biological human? Although such an abstract ideal may have a place in the conceptual analysis of the meaning of human life, it surely plays no part in our daily practice of working towards the liberation of individual humans and human institutions.

Regarding the liberation of humans, then, my point is this: we do not need an idea of an ideal human nature in order to understand practices of liberation and domination that we encounter in the everyday world. There are, of course, difficult cases. As a parent, for example, I

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have long been fascinated by the boundaries of education, socialization, indoctrination, and oppression in my relationships with my growing children. But the existence of gray areas and marginal cases does not in the least prevent me from recognizing the real oppression of children by their parents. My parenting, I hope, is always guided by both an understanding of the appropriate uses, abuses, and limitations of my authority, and a rather nebulous idea of a maturing autonomous human being in contemporary culture—the characteristics that I hope will develop in my children. Similarly, in the broader social and political sphere, we do not require an idea of an ideal human nature in order to oppose (for example) slave-labor practices, various forms of racial, gender, and religious discrimination, economic injustice, and imperialism. Our social context informs our decisions. What we mean by human liberation is embedded within our social categories, which may, of course, change as society itself becomes more (or less) liberated. So human liberation is the development of specific positive freedom- and life-enhancing roles, not the elimination of all social constraints, commitments, constructs, and categories. Although there will continue to be difficult cases, our ethics and our social praxis are enough. We need not turn to metaphysical speculation on the essence of humanity to give a robust normative content to our activities regarding human liberation.

Why is it not the same for our relationship with nature? Why do we need an idea of a nature in itself, outside of all human categories of knowledge and action, to give content to a robust nonanthropocentrism or to provide the basis for an idea of a nature free from human domination and evil? Surely our practical activities in their interaction with nature are enough to give us a sense of what is right and wrong—as it was for Anne Frank as she contemplated the meaning of her chestnut tree. Do I really need an idea of nature in itself, the nature of nature, to know that clear cutting a forest is a form of domination, an injury to the autonomous development of the forest ecosystem? Do I really need an idea of a nature unmediated by human categories of thought and action to know that damming a free-flowing river interferes with the spontaneous movement of natural processes—or that the BP oil spill was harmful to the ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico? Without denying that there will be difficult cases, it seems clear that we know what is involved in the domination (and thus, the liberation) of nature. Environmentalist

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practice informs our decisions; we have no need for metaphysical inquiries into the nature of nature as such.

To return to Marcuse's claim: nature also awaits the revolution, its liberation. Can we give a concrete example of what this means before we re-enter the world of Anne Frank and the Nazi domination of nature and humanity? What is the liberation of nature? What does the autonomy of nature look like? Consider an environmental issue dear to my heart: the ethics of beach preservation and sand replenishment projects on Fire Island, a barrier beach off the coast of Long Island in the Atlantic Ocean, where I have a summer home. Fire Island is an interesting case because it is a hybrid environment. The island is thirty-two miles long and at its thickest about a half-mile wide—it is, essentially, a long sandbar. Although there is no large-scale commercial development, some sections of the island are densely populated with individual homes on small lots. But most of the island remains undeveloped. There is a unique wilderness area in the central part of the island—the Sunken Forest—and the island is home to several threatened and endangered species of plants and birds. In 1964 the Federal Government purchased the island and made it part of the National Seashore, roughly equivalent to a national park.

As with all barrier beaches on the Eastern coast of the United States, Fire Island suffers from erosion. Individual homes, recreational beaches, and the wilderness areas are threatened by the loss—the movement—of sand. Whether or not a policy of beach replenishment should be undertaken is a question that raises interesting issues in technology, economics, social justice, and environmental ethics. I do not address those issues here.²⁰ In this chapter I am only concerned with the idea of the autonomy of nature. Can we look at the problem of beach erosion and the environmental policy of beach replenishment from the perspective of the liberation of nature?

Let us begin with the assumption that to liberate nature in this case, to permit the autonomy of natural processes, we would adopt a “hands-off” policy regarding beach erosion and replenishment. Rather than trying to mold and manipulate the beach environment, we would simply leave it alone—thus permitting both the natural erosion (and sometimes, the natural accretion) of sand to continue. But Fire Island is not a natural environment—as I mentioned above, it is a hybrid area of wilderness, relatively undisturbed beaches, and single-family homes.

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There are concrete and wooden walkways, a few unpaved sand and dirt roads, extensive bulkheading, and numerous boat channels and harbors. It is as much a built and human environment as a natural or wild one, and this human presence has a significant impact on the natural movement of the sand that comprises the beach and the island. The human presence makes the entire idea of the autonomy of natural processes rather suspect. Only if we were to systematically eliminate all human-built structures and modifications to the shoreline could we begin to approximate a natural environment (although such a situation would resemble an ecological restoration project, and thus probably not meet my idea of a natural system). Only on an island with no human structures or human presence could the idea of the liberation of nature make sense.

In the real world the systematic elimination of all human structures on the island is not going to happen. So let us undertake a philosophical thought experiment. Imagine an island identical to Fire Island—thirty-two miles long, central wilderness area, threatened and endangered species—but without a permanent human presence. No houses, no harbors, no boat channels, no sidewalks or roadways, and no bulkheading. On this imaginary island, what would the liberation of nature be like? Clearly, it would be *the continuation of the freedom from human impacts*. The autonomy of nature would be the unfolding of natural processes on the island—and the island's interactions with the ocean and bays—without the interference of humans, without the human development and alteration of the land. Nature would develop in its own way, not subject to the designs, plans, or projects of humanity. And to say that nature would develop in its own way does not imply that nature itself has a plan, a goal, or a *telos*. Rather, we are simply eliminating the dominating tendencies of human plans, human intentionality and design.

This imaginary island thought experiment shows that we do not need a positive conception of nature as such to understand the idea of the liberation and autonomy of nature. We do not need to know a nature outside of all human categories—indeed, the idea of nature that we have on this imaginary island is an idea constructed by our science: it is a nature that we understand through human categories. But this does not make it any less autonomous. As long as it is not being molded and transformed by human impacts it is a free and liberated nature. It may

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not be free of human domination in a metaphysical or epistemological sense, but in the realm of pragmatic environmental policy, it surely is.

Can the liberation of nature on this imaginary island help us in understanding and determining environmental policy on a real island, say the real Fire Island, with its complex and hybrid interacting human and natural ecosystems? Can it help us understand the process of domination and liberation in the world of Anne Frank, in the plans of the Nazi regime to oppress and dominate the landscapes and peoples of Eastern Europe? Let us first return to Fire Island, where I live, and where I need to know what environmental policies are morally justified. My argument and thought experiment show that even in hybrid environments we ought to lean towards leaving nature alone, we ought to minimize human impacts that affect the course of natural processes. In most cases, the mere absence of human domination will result in the liberation and autonomous development of nature. In actual policy decisions then, when we have a choice, we should choose the least intrusive, and hence least oppressive, policy of action. On Fire Island, for example, if we wish to protect the recreational beaches, the wilderness areas, and the endangered species, we ought to preserve the beach by a process of sand nourishment, using snow fencing to catch the windblown sand and planting dune vegetation to hold it in place. We should not build permanent structures such as rock jetties and sea walls. Of course, a full-scale policy discussion would require a much more detailed description of the specific facts of the concrete situation, and this is not the place for that discussion.²¹ My philosophical point about the formation of policy is merely this: we can make decisions about the autonomy of nature without plumbing the metaphysical depths of nature in itself. Thus it makes perfect sense to speak of the liberation of nature, to think of nature as analogous to a human subject, and to believe in the existence of a nature that is independent of human domination.

V.

So what we see in the Warsaw cemetery and the Majdanek death camp is an example of the independent nature idealized by Anne Frank when she contemplated the meaning of her tree. Here nature is liberated, free to pursue its own course after the evil, destruction, and degradation produced by human history. We can even see in these

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Holocaust sites another example of the imperialism of this nature free of human domination. Nature here acts—without an intention or design—to erase the remnants of human evil. To speak in metaphor, nature imposes its vision of the world on its human interpreters. But nature's vision is not our vision, and in these places it does not express the essence of our experience. Just as the human restoration of a degraded ecosystem turns a natural area into an artifact, nature's restoration of a site of human destruction alters the character of the site. This is why, as I argued in section III above, we cannot view the action of nature here as a kind of healing. Although the beauty of the trees in the cemetery cannot be denied, the meaning and value of the cemetery lies not in the re-emergent trees but in the historical significance of the Nazi plan to kill the Jews of Eastern Europe.

Nature's re-emergence at these Holocaust sites is, from the point of view of nature, a process of liberation, but from the point of view of humanity, it is an example of domination: the domination of meaning. Nature slowly exerts its power over the free development of human ideas, human memory, and human history. The actions of nature seem to attempt the eradication of the human meaning of these places. Now it may seem strange to think of the liberating processes of a free nature as a form of domination, but it is clear that one entity's acts of liberation can be seen as an act of domination over another entity. Consider Holocaust survivor Primo Levi's description of his liberation from Auschwitz. He recounts the series of baths that he and the other prisoners were given by the Allies: "it was easy to perceive behind the concrete and literal aspect a great symbolic shadow, the unconscious desire of the new authorities, who absorbed us in turn within their own sphere, to strip us of the vestiges of our former life, to make us new men consistent with their own models, to impose their brand upon us."²²

But Levi also compares these baths of liberation with the "devilish-sacral" or "black-mass" bath given by the Nazis as he entered the universe of the concentration camps. All of these baths serve as symbols of domination—the molding of human beings into artifacts appropriate for their current situation: free man or prisoner. The cleansing of liberation is thus comparable to the oppression of imprisonment, for both actions deny the autonomy of the free human subject. What can be considered to be a kind of healing—the liberation of Holocaust survivors or the emergence

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of trees over a mass grave—can be an expression of domination, if it modifies or destroys the meaning and the freedom of the original entity.

To understand the multiplicity of the forms of domination and liberation is the first step toward developing a comprehensive ethic for evaluating human activity in relationship to both the natural environment and the human community. We must resist the practice of human domination in all of its forms. We must act so as to preserve the free and autonomous development of human individuals, communities, and natural systems. We must understand the moral limits of our power to control nature and our fellow human beings.

Marcuse believed that after the revolution, not only would nature be liberated, but humanity would create a new non-dominating science, founded on a new sensibility of passivity, receptiveness, and openness. The new science would involve “the ability to see things in their own right, to experience the joy enclosed in them, the erotic energy of nature.”²³ I do not know if any of this is possible. Can we see nature in its own right, independent of human categories of thought? Is this not what Anne Frank thought about her tree, that it was somehow a symbol of the peace and healing that would envelop humanity? I am reminded of the last verse of the *kaddish*, the prayer that closes almost all Jewish services, and also serves as the prayer of mourning for the dead. This verse is a call for the healing power of peace. *Osay shalom bimromov hoo ya-absay shalom, olaynoo v'al kol yisroayl*—“May He who establishes peace in the heavens, grant peace unto us and unto all Israel.” In viewing the Warsaw cemetery and the Majdanek death camp, I was moved by the hope, as was Anne Frank, that nature could be the agent that establishes peace. But nature alone cannot accomplish this. If there is a God, He works through human decisions. Only humans can understand the meaning and history of evil. Only humans who understand the need to control our power can halt the practice of domination, can halt the destruction of people and the natural environment. It is only through human actions that peace can be restored to our planet and our civilization. And so we turn in the next chapter, to a consideration of human history.

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Notes to Chapter One

1. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 1996, 100.
2. For a general discussion of Majdanek and the overall history of the Holocaust, see Yahil 1990, especially 362–63. See also Gilbert 1985, and the classic Holocaust history, Hilberg 2003 (3rd edition). Hilberg notes the quick evacuation of Majdanek (1045–46) and Gilbert cites Hitler's disgust that the camp was not destroyed (711).
3. van Pelt 1994, 101–03.
4. Katz 1992b; 1993; 1995; and 1997.
5. I have examined each of these thinkers in the past and will merely review, in brief, my analysis here. See Krieger 1973; Maser 1988; Katz 1979; 1991; 1992a; and 1997.
6. See Katz 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1993; 1995; 1996b; 1997; 2000; 2002; 2009; and 2012.
7. Lewis [1947] 1983, 143, 146.
8. See Book I, paragraphs 4–5.
9. See, for a prominent example of this line of thinking, the seminal work by Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 1975.
10. Duncan 1991, 8.
11. See Katz 1995 and Rolston 1988, esp. 342–54.
12. Katz 1995.
13. I am indebted to Avner de-Shalit for bringing this argument to my attention.
14. See Katz 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1993; 1995; 1996b; 1997; 2000; 2002; 2009; and 2012.
15. Marcuse 1972, 74.
16. Leiss 1974.
17. Merchant 1980; Warren 1990.
18. Rodman 1977; Singer 1975 and Stone 1974.
19. Vogel 1996, 141.
20. See Katz 1999.
21. The example of snow-fencing to capture sand as a method of beach replenishment will return several times in the course of this book. Let me say here that the reason why a snow-fence is different in kind from a stone and rock sea wall is the physical fact of the permanence of the sea wall. A flimsy wooden slatted snow-fence does nothing to change the essential character of the physical environment; it is a mere passive and temporary object to collect sand blown by the wind. This is entirely different from a stone wall that is meant to stay in place for a long period of time (decades, if not more) and that has permanent effects on the processes of the natural system. But note that there will be appropriate places to build sea walls; namely, in environments and places that are already highly artificial, such as a seaport. My thanks to Andrew Brennan for this last point.
22. Levi 1987, 8.
23. Marcuse 1972, 74.