From “Spinoza and Ecology”

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In what follows I do not try to prove anything. I invite the reader to consider a set of hypothetic connections between Spinozist philosophy and ecological thought. Most of them seem obvious to me, but every one needs to be carefully scrutinized. They are (of course) built upon a set of definite interpretations of ecology and of the texts of Spinoza.

The nature conceived by field ecologists is not the passive, dead, value-neutral nature of mechanistic science, but akin to the God as Nature of Spinoza. All-inclusive, creative (as *natura naturans*), infinitely diverse, and alive in the broad sense of panpsychism, but also manifesting a structure, the so-called laws of nature. There are always causes to be found, but extremely complex and difficult to unearth. The Nature with capital N is intuitively conceived as perfect in a sense that Spinoza and outdoor ecologists have more or less in common: It is not a narrowly [instrumental] moral, utilitarian, or aesthetic perfection. Nature is perfect ‘in itself.’

Perfection can only mean completeness of some sort when applied in general, and not to specifically human, achievements. In the latter case it means reaching what has been consciously intended.

The value-dualism spirit/matter, soul/body does not hold in Spinoza nor is it of any use in field ecology. The two aspects of Nature, those of extension and thought, are both complete aspects of one single reality, and perfection characterizes both.

In view of the tendency to look upon the body as something more crude than spirit, both field ecologists and Spinoza oppose most forms of idealism and spiritualism—and, of course, moralism [*i.e.* making judgments about others’ morality].

Good and evil must be defined in relation to beings for which something is good or evil, useful or detrimental. The terms are meaningless, when not thus related.

This accords well with the effort of field ecologists to understand each culture 'from within'. It contrasts with explaining or moralizing on the basis of a definite value code dominant within particular (mostly industrial) societies.

Every thing is connected with every other. There is a network of cause-effect relations connecting everything with everything. Nothing is causally inactive, nothing wholly without an essence which it expresses through being a cause.

The ecologist Barry Commoner has called 'All things are connected' the first principle of ecology. Intimate interconnectedness, in the sense of internal rather than external relations, characterizes ecological ontology.

Every being strives to preserve and develop its specific essence or nature. Every essence is a manifestation of God or Nature. There are infinite ways in which Nature thus expresses itself. And there are infinite kinds of beings expressing God or Nature.

The pervasive basic striving is no mere effort to adapt to stimuli from the outside. It is an active shaping of the environment. Successful acts create new wider units of organism/environment. The basic urge is to gain in extent and intensiveness of self-causing. The term 'self-realization' is therefore better than 'self-preservation', the former suggests activeness and creativity, the latter a passive, defensive attitude.

If one insists upon using the term "rights", every being may be said to have the right to do what is in its power. It is a "right" to express its own nature as clearly and extensively as natural conditions permit. "That right which they (the animals) have in relation to us, we have in relation to them." (Spinoza *Ethics*, Part 4, First Scholium to Proposition 37). Rights as part of a separate moral world order is a fiction.

Field ecologists tend to accept a general 'right to live and blossom'. Humans have no special right to kill and injure. Nature does not belong to them.

Every being has its unique direction of self-realization, its particular essence, but "the greatest good" is the "understanding of the union (*cognitio unionis*) of our mind with whole Nature".