Green Ethics and Green ‘Faith’: An Exploration of Environmental Ethics and Spirituality in a Technological Age

by

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Abstract

The main concern of this dissertation is exploring and elucidating the nature and the relationship of religion/spirituality and ethics in the context of environmentalism, within the larger arena of liberal, technological society. It is driven foremost by a need for clear understanding of not only what these terms mean and what they represent, but also what it all means for where we stand today as ethical and spiritual beings. For in pursuing this topic, one must necessarily ask larger questions, namely: What does it mean to be ethical in technological society? What does it mean to be ‘spiritual’ in a ‘secular’ society? Are either of these things even possible? These questions form the backdrop of my particular focus on environmentalism.

Through analysis of my own ethnographic research with members of the Sierra Club of Canada, and through use of the theoretical frameworks provided by four primary thinkers (Juan Luis Segundo, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Jacques Ellul), I conclude that environmentalism, though far from problem-free, represents a ‘healthy’ form of ethical and spiritual expression in modern technological society. Part of this conclusion is the position that we are still very much ethical beings in technological society, and very much spiritual beings in
secular society (though the latter is far more dependent on individual definitions of this term), and that in fact these two things relate directly.
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Few things in the contemporary world are of such increasingly alarming import as what is widely referred to as the ‘environmental crisis.’ What this ‘crisis’ refers to, of course, is a number of interrelated problems, caused directly by human beings, that threaten the balance of life on earth: pollution, climate change, resource depletion, species extinction, habitat loss, shrinking of biodiversity, and the general despoliation of areas of natural beauty and wildness. The data are too numerous to ignore; we are, without a doubt, effecting major negative change on our planet, in some cases irreversibly – and the impact is intensifying.

Despite the ready availability of this information and its acceptance by leading scientists worldwide, there is little in the way of large-scale effort to alter our course of development as a species. It seems a testament to the sheer entrenchment of our economic and technological systems and ways of life (particularly in the West/North), and the momentum they carry, that we move forward with generally little pause for reflection into an environmentally problematic future.

My purpose here is not, however, to add another volume to the countless works, from a wide variety of disciplines, denouncing our current path by enumerating all the ways we are destroying the environment and ourselves. I take this as an assumed starting point; the environmental crisis, however it is specifically described, is real, and requires action and change. Similarly, I take for granted that there is a significant movement, global in scope and often local in manifestation, that refuses to accept increased environmental degradation as inevitable; it consists of people all over the world, in different cultural contexts, actively trying to undo as best as possible the damage we as a species have caused, and to change our course to one that is less destructive. The environmental movement, though necessarily amorphous and vague as a
category, is nonetheless very real.

The fact of environmental destruction, and the social (cultural, intellectual, religious) movement that has developed in its wake, is a defining reality of our time. It is an important barometer of who we are as a species, and how we will develop in the years to come. This is not melodramatic; the consequences of our environmental impact, and of our reactions and shifts in attitude in response to it, are enormously significant. Again, it is not my aim to make an argument for this. For better or worse, I take it for granted in launching into the exploration that follows.

The significance of environmentalism – the broad, multifaceted movement to halt environmental degradation – demands that philosophy keep pace. Our scientific knowledge of exactly how we are impacting the planet has grown by leaps and bounds, and expands with each passing day; how we deal with this increased knowledge, how we react to it, has only recently become a serious area of philosophical inquiry. 1 This specialized scholarly area has become known as ‘environmental ethics’; it has in fact become so specialized to virtually become a discipline unto itself, so that areas of study sometimes emerge as ‘environmental ethics and religion,’ ‘philosophy of environmental ethics,’ or something similar. 2

Whatever it is officially labelled, the philosophical study of environmentalism has emerged as an important new area of scholarship, and it is under this purview that this work falls. Yet mine is by nature an interdisciplinary project. I consider the present work to be, generally speaking, an exercise in the study of ethics; but it is also one in the study of religion. As will

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1Here I speak of philosophy quite broadly, rather than in reference to the specific academic discipline; included would be perspectives from religious studies (my own), theology, anthropology, women’s studies, psychology, sociology, and a host of others, as well as philosophy.

2I will return to this point when addressing definitional issues.
become clear, my distinction between these studies is (intentionally) blurry at best.

The main concern of this dissertation is exploring and elucidating the nature and the relationship of religion/spirituality and ethics in the context of environmentalism, within the larger arena of liberal,\(^3\) technological society. It is driven foremost by a need for clear understanding of not only what these terms mean and what they represent, but also what it all means for where we stand today as ethical and spiritual beings. For in pursuing this topic, one must necessarily ask larger questions, namely: What does it mean to be ethical in technological society? What does it mean to be ‘spiritual’ in a ‘secular’ society? Are either of these things even possible? The questions, far from being peripheral, form the backdrop of my particular focus on environmentalism.

What I intend to ‘prove,’ other than the inherent importance of better understanding the nature of ethics and religion/spirituality in modernity, is that environmentalism, though far from problem-free, represents a ‘healthy’ form of ethical and spiritual expression in modern technological society.\(^4\) Part of this ‘proof’ will be the argument that we are still very much ethical beings in technological society, and very much spiritual beings in ‘secular’ society (though the

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\(^3\)The terms ‘liberalism,’ ‘contractual liberalism,’ ‘practical liberalism,’ and others, which I use somewhat interchangeably throughout, are all variously used by the authors I examine to describe roughly the same thing. George Grant, for instance, says: “I mean by liberalism a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man’s essence is his freedom and therefore that what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it” (1969, 114 n.3). This has philosophical, economic, and political dimensions. The term ‘liberalism’ is obviously broader than (but related to) the term ‘neoliberalism,’ which Robert McChesney somewhat cynically defines as referring to “the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit” (1999, 7). Grant and McChesney’s definitions are more closely related than they may seem at first glance; however, for the purpose of clarity, I restrict myself to the former, more general term. This philosophical-economic understanding is of course distinct from the somewhat confusing political use of the term ‘liberal’ or ‘liberalism,’ referring mainly to social policies, or identification with the ‘left.’

\(^4\)Again, what I mean by ‘technological society,’ and in referring to humans as ‘technological beings,’ is explained in detail in what follows.
latter is far more dependent on individual definitions of this term), and that in fact these two things relate directly. Ultimately, this (hopefully) makes my study a positive contribution to the study of religion, the academic discipline with which I am most explicitly connected; but I intend it also to be a positive contribution to the study of ethics generally. Perhaps most importantly, I believe this project is worthwhile simply because of the large (and growing) significance of environmentalism, and because of my distinct bias: that without change of the kind embraced and proposed by environmentalists, we as technological beings will utterly stultify ethically, and destroy recklessly and finally our terrestrial home. Although I am aware of the scholarly fashion to ‘bracket out’ such biases, I acknowledge the postmodern insight that writing without bias is impossible, and indeed bad scholarly practice, particularly when examining ethics. This is not to say, however, that a scholarly examination ought to be any less rigorous, rounded, and fair, nor does it excuse the responsibility of accuracy, consistency, and rationality in presenting one’s points.

Methodology

This project began as a hybrid, combining a variety of methodologies; this includes ethnographic fieldwork and analysis, and more traditional textual, philosophical analysis.

The ethnographic component has been reduced in overall weight in the dissertation as a whole than was my intention at the outset of this project, but it is important nonetheless to clearly present my research methodology. My research was conducted with members of the Ontario (formerly Eastern) Chapter of the Sierra Club of Canada, a prominent environmental group both nationally and regionally (in Ontario, and specifically in Toronto). My intention was to conduct
fieldwork as an observer and interviewer, and as a participant, in my role as Volunteer Coordinator for the Chapter. The fieldwork was to consist of a questionnaire, followed by a series of relatively brief, low-structure interviews with members of the Club (both volunteers and non-volunteers), as well as participant-observation at meetings and events. The research question framing the fieldwork was: “What is the role of religion and/or spirituality in the beliefs and actions of activists?” This included their sense of values, meaningfulness, and moral urgency or imperative. I defined three research ‘sites’: the questionnaires, the one-on-one interviews with a sample group, and my participant-observation in meetings and at events. The analysis of the data, including an examination of prominent themes that emerged and in particular what participants believe ‘being ethical’ and ‘being religious/spiritual’ in the environmental context involves, as well as a presentation of relevant statistics and cross-tabulations, were to make up approximately half of the dissertation.

This was the original intent. Methodologically, the result largely conformed to it; however, the small amount of actual interviews with willing participants, along with my own augmented emphasis on more theoretical analysis, has ultimately reduced the influence of the ethnographic portion on the direction and conclusions of the dissertation. My focus shifted from attempting a complete anthropological study, within the boundaries of that discipline, to understanding the participants and research sites as further sources alongside the textual ones. This requires some clarification.

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5 Although fully aware of the debate, I do not intend to weigh in on the insider/outsider problem. My role as Volunteer Coordinator, and the active volunteer contribution I made to the Chapter while conducting my research, enhanced my understanding of the research ‘sites’ and was crucial in building a sense of rapport and comfort with participants.
There is immediate, and justified, reservation in likening research participants to textual sources. The implication is that the participants are static entities simply to be ‘read’ for the purpose of gathering information. This, of course, is an inappropriate understanding, primarily because it is disrespectful of the people involved. It is also academically irresponsible, because it is an erroneous understanding; people are not static entities. In stating that I treated participants as sources, similarly to textual sources, I am fully aware of this reality. My approach was, and remains, that participants are dynamic sources. They change, react, and initiate in my interaction with them, and this must be taken into account and accepted as part of the information gleaned from the source.

This is precisely what makes ethnographic sources so important to a study, particularly one on contemporary ethics. A dynamic source consistently challenges the researcher’s assumptions. This is not entirely unlike a good textual source; there is a relationship of sorts, or at least an interaction, that is formed.

Perhaps a more helpful way to understand the ethnography, rather than with the dynamic/static source dichotomy, is as an inherently unstable project; that is, one that continues to unfold. Rather than understand the interviews and surveys as a fossilized category, unchanging and fixed, it is much more accurate to understand them as moments of lived, sedimented histories; as participants further develop and explore their own sense of environmentalism, ethics, and spirituality, the categorical bounds of analysis and explanation must shift. In other words, my fieldwork is self-consciously ‘wading in’ to the flowing stream of the ethical and spiritual experiences of the participants. I willingly accept the post-structuralist insight that such a project can never actually be bounded or complete.
This acknowledgment does not dull the importance of the inclusion of the voices of participants in the present dissertation. It is a form of arrogance to assume that one can discuss contemporary forms of ethics without actually listening to what people say about their beliefs, actions, and values, even within a small scope. To abandon the ethnographic portion of my work entirely would have been too great a loss, and would have left it incomplete. Thus, though I did not in the end undertake to fully immerse myself in and strive to understand a particular community as might be expected in a larger, more standard anthropological work, I compromised none of the rigour of analysis of the data obtained, nor of methodological reflection. The information gleaned both from participants and my own participant-observation forms an integral part of this dissertation.

For the sake of concision and stylistic cohesion, however, I have chosen to present and offer analysis of only a select part of the ethnography in Chapter One; the bulk of the material, including survey and interview question samples, transcript highlights, survey results, and more specific correlative analysis, can be found in the appendices.

My methodology regarding textual sources was fairly standard. The basic ideas behind the work are the result of several bits and pieces of influence and a process of slow fermentation over years, and as a result reflect sources that are difficult to define (and sometimes forgotten). They are not based on one particular author’s theories, or one particular text. Nonetheless, the points presented in this dissertation are grounded largely in the seminal theories of five contemporary thinkers. With regards to technological society and modernity, Jacques Ellul; relating to ethics and meaning-formation in modernity, Juan Luis Segundo, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre; on all of these topics, George Grant. None of these thinkers, however, are generally
considered ‘environmentalists’ (despite direct comments some made on the subject), and each of them has little or nothing to say about environmental ethics (though Taylor may become an exception to this with future publications). As such, my research on these authors was never intended to be an exhaustive review of their life’s work; I treated each as theoretical grounding points for my own ideas. I do not, as a result, give a detailed explanation of the development and nuance of their thought, except where necessary for the purposes of clarification and accuracy.

This then leads to the question of whether or not what is presented here is an explicitly philosophical argument. The answer is that it is, to a certain extent. Certainly one cannot engage in a scholarly discussion of ethics without taking some kind of philosophical stance, and indeed I have. Naturally, I then support and argue for this stance philosophically. The overarching goal of the work, however, is ultimately not only to prove something, but to call attention to the way things are – the nature and characteristics of environmental ethics and spirituality in liberal, technological society – and invite critical response. This, it might be said, is the fashion of much scholarship today. Even one of the most enlightening texts of recent years, one from which I liberally draw, is of this nature: Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. While by no means bereft of a philosophical position (or positions), it is, in his own words, a “work of retrieval.” While my own work is a far cry from his celebrated and comprehensive philosophical history of modern identity, it is in the spirit of scholarly articulation that I launched into and have presented my research (mine is not so much a work of retrieval as of clarification of exactly where environmental ethics stand, and how they may represent ‘healthier’ ethics in modernity).

At this point it is useful to say something about the existing fields of literature relating to this work. The scholarly area of ‘ethics in modernity,’ taken as a whole, is far too broad to
constitute any meaningful category, as is the study of ‘secular ethics’; however, one might loosely group together general, overarching philosophical works on the topic as theories on ‘modern ethical frameworks’ (as represented by a variety of authors, including some mentioned in the course of this dissertation: Taylor, Segundo, Grant, Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, Zygmunt Bauman, Margaret Somerville, Larry Schmidt, and others). Further narrowing the scope, ‘environmental ethics,’ as an academic field, has a diverse set of literature, both academic and popular. Included in this are various philosophical and scientific approaches to understanding ‘nature’ (both as social construct and environmental surroundings) and our attitudes and actions towards and in it. Among the more well-known movements studied under the aegis of environmental ethics are Deep Ecology (Arne Naess, George Sessions, Bill Devall), Social Ecology (Murray Bookchin, Janet Biehl), Ecofeminism (Karen Warren, Charlene Spretnak, Carolyn Merchant), and Environmental Justice (Ramachandra Guha, Winona LaDuke, Peter Wenz). As mentioned, ‘religion and the environment’ or ‘religion and environmental ethics’ has emerged as a kind of ‘subset’ field to environmental ethics, but with a rich and varied body of literature of its own (including authors such as Lynn White, Jr., Thomas Berry, Sallie McFague, Joanna Macy, John Cobb, Jr., Stephen Scharper, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim). In the case of both ‘environmental ethics’ and ‘religion and the environment,’ enough scholarship has been produced to warrant several anthologies and collections.⁶

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In addition, the study of technology and ethics has a diverse set of literature. Jacques Ellul’s seminal work in critique of technological society is a common basis, influencing later authors such as Grant and Jonas. Although naturally there are authors in the area of technology and ethics (perhaps even the majority) who argue in favor of our progression as technological beings, my grounding will be in the critical approach initiated by those like Ellul (of the ‘continental’ branch of philosophy). It is also possible to include in this area of literature the work of Simone Weil (who wrote prior to Ellul) and E.F. Schumacher.

Although there is an ever-increasing amount of scholarship in each of these categories, it is rare that discourses on modern ethical frameworks, religion/spirituality, and environmentalism are brought together (let alone in the context of a critique of technological society). ‘Religion and the environment,’ as a scholarly area, is composed almost entirely of analysis of the relationship of religions traditions and institutions to the environmental movement. The most prominent (relatively) recent example of this is the Forum on Religion and Ecology, hosted by the Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions (organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim), out of which has come the book series The Religions of the World and Ecology. The volumes in the series each focus on a major religious tradition and the environment. Rarely, however, has the religiosity or sense of spirituality of ‘secular’ environmental activists (i.e., those whose activism in environmental issues is not outwardly done on behalf of religious institutions) been examined vis-à-vis broader theories of modern ethical frameworks. Similarly, there has not,

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7 How, exactly, the area of technology, ethics, and society relates to environmentalism, and to religion, will of course be explored and explained throughout the course of this work.

8 There are some notable examples of work examining religion/spirituality in ‘secular’ environmentalism; for instance, Bron Taylor’s study of Earth First!. Further linking this kind of work to theories of modern ethical frameworks is not, however, a step that is taken.
to my knowledge, been study of the basic similarity and connection of the ethical and religious/spiritual impulse in the context of social activism, and how this relates to the nature of ethics in technological society. And finally, as I have mentioned, general ethical theorists such as Taylor and Segundo have not, by and large, applied their frameworks to the context of environmentalism, even where a consideration of religion/spirituality is present (as it is particularly with Segundo).

It is precisely these gaps that I undertook to fill in launching into this dissertation. While environmental ethicists continue to articulate ways in which we must reformulate our relationship to our natural environment in order to halt and reverse the widespread ecological damage we have caused, and scholars are revealing more and more ways religious traditions can contribute to that both from within and without, I believe there needs to be a critical study of what exactly it means to be ethical in the context of environmentalism, and how a sense of religion/spirituality relates to this. Religion has traditionally been the primary source of values, and hence has provided the framework for the individual’s ethic; however, in today’s ‘secular’ world, where religion competes with other sources of values, what animates the environmentalist’s (and the environmentalist groups’) sense of ethics? The question is not only of interest and importance to scholars in the field from the standpoint of pure advancement of knowledge, but also to the practical implications of what is ever-increasingly becoming a global phenomenon. Now more than ever activists and world leaders are moving beyond national borders to address environmental issues (climate change and the Kyoto Protocol being the most prominent recent

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9Though some have indeed explicitly linked ethics and spirituality in the context of environmentalism; see, for instance, Lois Daly’s article “Ecological Activism” (1996).
example). The Earth Charter, drafted by an international body (initially requested by the United Nations) and increasingly endorsed worldwide, is intended to be a definitive statement of common ecological values and ethical principles; to understand such an initiative and to critically examine the foundation for such a global ethic is crucial as international environmental regulations are being formed. Further, the interplay between environmental activism and a sense of spirituality offers an excellent example of the current trend from organized to personalized religion, the study of which constitutes a significant contribution to the field of religious studies.

**Definitions**

There are a few key terms that require a clear working definition before being used commonly throughout the rest of the work. Most of these terms are fluid, in that they can mean slightly (or sometimes wholly) different things to different people; this, of course, is all the more reason to clearly define them at the outset. I make no claim that my definitions are normative; this outline is for the purpose of clarity alone.

‘Environmental ethics,’ as has been mentioned, is an increasingly common category of academic study, a subset of the wider study of ethics. This justifies the use of the singular in reference to ‘it.’ The category is an abstraction, but one that helps us group a certain strain of scholarship, including the present work. This is an inherently limited definition, and a straightforward one.

The idea of ‘environmental ethics’ can be confusing, however, when one considers the singular term ‘ethic.’ A person or group’s ethic is something specific; it is a set of principles, a

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10See www.earthcharter.org for more information.
system of belief or structure of meaning that governs actions and attitudes. One can speak of a Quaker ethic, for example, or (perhaps more vaguely) a Canadian ethic; similarly, it makes sense to refer to an environmental ethic. An individual’s (or group’s) ethic may be geared primarily toward environmental concerns. If we speak of multiple individuals having such sets of principles, they of course have environmental ethics, simply pluralizing the term; this then creates confusion in use with the term ‘environmental ethics’ as a field of study.

The ideas behind each use of the term are obviously related, as are the definitions. It is nonetheless important to be clear on the distinction, particularly for the present work, which is both a study in environmental ethics (i.e., under its purview) and a study of environmental ethics (i.e., of ‘green’ principles and values). To maintain this distinction, I consistently refer to the academic category ‘environmental ethics’ in the singular, and the study of sets of principles, ‘environmental ethics,’ in the plural. In point of fact, there will be little cause to refer to the former notion, and when I do so it is clear; by default, this dissertation is concerned with ‘ethics’ in the plural.

Similarly confusing, potentially, is my understanding of the broader term ‘ethics.’ The same distinction applies between the common academic field of study, and the plural of the term ‘ethic.’ The clarification necessary here is of a different nature, however. Perhaps owing to my background (formally) in religious studies rather than philosophy, I do not adhere to a strict scholarly definition of the study of ethics, or sub-categorize myself within that study. Mine is a very broad understanding of what constitutes ‘ethics’; put most simply, it is what people believe and how they act, and the relationship between the two. If such a definition is almost absurdly broad, it is to make the point that I consider everything to be, in some way, a matter of ethics.
This is clearly where I distance myself from the formal definition of the discipline. The study of ethics is certainly the study of good/evil, right/wrong, ought/ought not, and the countless theories on these things;\(^1\) but it is more basically a study of people’s foundational meaning- and belief-structures, what orients us from day to day in the course of our decision making. Whether it is called a ‘worldview’ or an ‘ethic,’ we all, inherently, have one (though it is not always clearly articulated). Segundo and Taylor in particular make this clear, as will be discussed later.

It is because of this broad understanding of ‘ethics’ that I make an explicit connection of its study to that of religion. A corollary argument in this dissertation is that in the context of environmentalism, at the most basic anthropological level, ‘being ethical’ and ‘being religious’ relate closely, stemming from the same impulse. This, I hope, will become clear in what follows. Again, however, an important preface is clarifying my working definition of ‘religious’ and, consequently, ‘spiritual.”

As all students of religion learn early, there is no commonly accepted specific definition of ‘religion,’ and very little space will be wasted here trying to resolve the debate. I generally refer to ‘religion’ as formal, organized tradition, in the fairly commonly accepted general sense; if I am making a more specific reference, I make that clear. In its adjectival form, however, there is more cause for confusion. As was evidenced by the number of people interviewed for this project who claimed to be ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious,’ there is a serious and now common distinction made between these terms (to be examined in Chapter One in particular). The same kind of

\(^1\)Without intending to add to the confusion, I could perhaps suggest this more specific concern to be the study of morality, or moral philosophy (if one is examining theories of morality). Indeed, particularly in my section on MacIntyre and Taylor, my concern will be primarily (though not wholly) with morality in this sense. I find it difficult to distinguish, however, between the study of people’s sense of good/evil or right/wrong and a study of their sense of meaningfuless, their values, and the way they live their lives; this is why I speak of ‘ethics’ more generally, which, formally speaking, also includes elements of metaphysics, and perhaps epistemology.
differentiation was given in all cases: something personal, fluid, deep-seeded, and individual (though it can be shared) versus something formalistic, rigid, organized, doctrinal, and group-oriented. The obvious negative and positive associations, at least amongst many of those interviewed, were clear.

While I must respect these definitions and understandings, my own use of the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ in the present exploration tends to observe this distinction less strictly. My resolution to this is often to use the cumbersome ‘religious/spiritual’ format, with the reasoning that the importance of remaining open to indigenous definitions and understandings outweighs the awkwardness of use. Ultimately, context should make usage of these terms clear.

For the purpose of this dissertation, and the philosophical speculation herein, I offer the following working definition of the religious/spiritual ‘sense,’ or ‘impulse’: I understand it to be a sense of one’s own ‘spirit,’ a personal force and identity beyond (but including) the aggregate of physical body and social/cultural influence, and the recognition of spirit in others and in nature, and perhaps the cosmos, generally. It also includes the derivation of meaning and value from this sense, that there is something more to life than can be quantified. It is an acknowledgement of and deference to mystery; it is also an inherently binding force from which a sense of community and communal meaning can be derived. It can be felt but not always expressed, and may or may not be articulated in traditionally religious ways. Obviously, this understanding overlaps with the more common understanding of what it means to be ‘religious,’ but is generally broader, and more individualistic.

As I will argue, both the religious/spiritual and ethical impulse, specifically in the context of environmentalism, stem from the same source, ultimately grounded in something beyond the
observable (and conventionally provable). Again, this will become clear as a corollary to my main focus on articulating and understanding environmental ethics in a technological age.

Many more definitional issues arise in the course of what follows, and will be dealt with in turn in the proper context. Suffice it, for now, to have clearly stated my understanding and usage of certain foundational terms for this topic of study.

Chapter Breakdown

When tackling a topic as broad as the present one, the temptation is to try to present it all at once in its ‘big picture.’ This, of course, is impossible; the challenge then remains to break it down into manageable components, each given its due. In no way, however, do I consider the chapter delineations to be strict boundaries, with the specific focus in each able to be taken in isolation from the rest.

In Chapter One, “Ethics and ‘Secular Spirituality: Case Study of Sierra Club of Canada Activists,’” I present and offer preliminary analysis of part of my fieldwork research. I will locate this research in particular within the literature on the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon of modernity, within the broader secularization debate. I also touch on the notion of ‘secular spirituality.’

Chapter Two, “Examining the Structure of Meaning: Segundo’s ‘Faith’ and ‘Ideologies,’” turns to a theoretical analysis of meaning- and belief-structures, using Segundo’s framework of ‘faith’ and ‘ideologies’ (drawn primarily from his text of this title). His phenomenological (or, as
he understands it, anthropological) account of the building blocks of ethics and the creation of meaning are useful, and examined in detail.

In Chapter Three, “Creating a Picture of Modern Moral Horizons: MacIntyre and Taylor,” I turn to examining some of the hallmarks of modern morality. MacIntyre (primarily for his critique) and Taylor provide comprehensive analyses of the roots of modern ethics that remain standards, and each will be examined in turn, as well as their interrelationship.

Chapter Four, “The Nature of Technique: Ellul,” is devoted to an in-depth examination of Ellul’s analysis and critique of technological society. This, to me, is the wider canvas on which the picture of modern ethics and religion/spirituality is painted; Ellul offers the most thorough account.

Chapter Five, “Bridging Theories: A Cross-Section of Modern Ethics in Technological Society,” brings together the theories of the previous three chapters, thus far treated separately, in order to flesh out the fullest possible understanding of ethics in technological society.

Chapter Six, “Linking Contemporary Notions of Ethics and Religion/Spirituality through the Context of Environmentalism: The Role of the Individual,” returns to the question of religion/spirituality, including a re-examination of some of the participants’ accounts, and in particular a look at the role of the individual.

In the Conclusion, I further link themes examined throughout, suggesting that an environmental ethic/spirituality offers a healthy and important (though not completely unproblematic) alternative to the predominant liberal, technological framework, particularly through an embracing of the notion of limit independent of humanity.

I have also included three appendices, in which my fieldwork is treated more fully. In
Appendix 1, I present and offer some analysis of survey findings, as well as the in-person interviews (including excerpts from transcripts). The second and third appendices give samples of the survey and written interview questions, totals for the survey questions, and cross-tabulations of survey statistics.
Chapter 1
Ethics and ‘Secular Spirituality’: Case Study of Sierra Club of Canada Activists

Yeah, I guess my sense of environmentalism, or the way I act toward, you know, positively for the environment is driven quite a bit by an ethical understanding of what’s right and wrong, in the large sense. I don’t think it’s right to treat the earth like a pile of resources to be chopped up and sold around the world . . . So that is an ethical thought, I suppose, or ethically-driven idea, that shapes my environmentalism... And I don’t know if I have a direct connection involving spirituality, but I guess the spirituality aspect could come in as to the ‘why not?’, why can’t the earth just be treated like a big pile of stuff to be bought and sold. That’s one interpretation, it’s also possible . . . Another thing is that I recognize that a forest is more than just a bunch of lumber . . . or that, you know, animals are more than just potential hamburgers, or things like that, so . . . Perhaps that . . . recognition involves spirituality, per se... I think it – I don’t tend to think of it in that way, but the way I’ve defined spirituality, it sort of fits into that idea.

-Jeremy, SCC member and volunteer

The above excerpt is from a recorded interview with a Sierra Club of Canada (SCC) member and volunteer describing his understanding of the connection between ethics and spirituality, particularly in the context of his own environmentalism. It is but one example of the complex relationship of the elements of environmental commitment, and how difficult it can be for individuals to explain the origins of this commitment. It is with some of the accounts of the participants in my fieldwork that I would like to begin my exploration of religion/spirituality and environmental ethics, examined within the wider context of the movement from ‘religion’ to ‘spirituality’ in self-identification, and the development of what might be understood as ‘secular spirituality.’

As mentioned in the Introduction, this is not intended as a comprehensive anthropological account. My explicit intention in engaging in fieldwork with the SCC was to connect ethical theory to ‘on-the-ground’ practice; in other words, to actual people, without whom, after all, any notion of ‘ethics’ would be meaningless. Listening to what actual environmentalists (in this case, defined specifically as members of the SCC) have to say provides a more complete picture of the
connection between environmental ethics and religion/spirituality in modernity.

Rather than present the ethnographic data in detail here, I have chosen to make the majority of it available in the appendices, and instead offer a summary here along with some basic analysis (of the written responses to interview questions in particular). This is done primarily to preserve stylistic cohesion, rather than attempting to flip between statistical, oral history, and philosophical analyses, each requiring significantly different presentation.

There is, nonetheless, a definite common thread running through the questions asked of participants in the surveys and interviews that connects them to the larger themes of my project. My interest in speaking with SCC members stemmed from my observation, from the days of my early involvement with the organization, that there was a significant sense of commitment to a ‘higher’ purpose – one not specifically identified, though manifested in a variety of particular environmental issues – despite the clearly secular context of the group’s activities and discussions. I instinctively, and not surprisingly, associated this with the ever-emerging phenomenon of self-identification as ‘spiritual but not religious,’ though this association was not unproblematic because even such language and behaviour that might be identified as ‘spiritual’ was not obviously present in shared conversation and campaign planning and execution. While a sense of this existed, it was clear that any explicit expression of it would be considered personal belief, and would have to be accessed as such on a one-on-one basis (or with anonymous surveys). Ethical commitment, however, was abundantly clear, and part of the shared discourse. The link between a sense of spirituality, ethics, and environmentalism thus became the overarching concern not only for theoretical/philosophical research, but the overarching concern for my ethnographic work as well.
As such, it seems appropriate to launch into the investigation by presenting and analyzing jointly theory about the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon along with some key ethnographic findings.

**‘Spiritual but not religious’**

There is no shortage of scholarly commentary on the contemporary phenomenon of self-identification as ‘spiritual but not religious.’ The majority offers essentially the same conclusion; that despite earlier proclamations by theorists of secularization, religiosity is not universally on the wane, even within so-called ‘secular’ nations. Rather, it is being transformed, finding renewed vitality in the form of more personalized ‘spirituality.’

Wade Clark Roof, whose book *A Generation of Seekers* (1993) is perhaps the most commonly cited reference in the matter, famously characterizes the ageing baby boomer generation as turning more and more to forms of spirituality: “Boomers see religion in somewhat different ways than their parents did – with a greater concern for spiritual quest, for connectedness and unity, and for a vision that encompasses body and spirit, the material as well as the immaterial” (26). It is misleading, he argues, to understand religion/spirituality as a phenomenon on the decline in modern society based on institutional statistics of traditional religious organizations. People may not be filling the pews, but that is not indicative of a lack of interest in the religious or the spiritual. One of the characteristics Roof identifies of the boomer conception of religion is the distinction between *spirit* and *institution* (otherwise put, between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’): “For many, maybe even the majority of boomers today, personal faith

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1 I will return to the discussion of secularization later in the chapter.
and spirituality seem somehow disconnected from many of the older institutional forms” (30).

The emphasis is on religious experience rather than tradition (67). A quote from one of Roof’s participants clearly parallels the responses I received in my own interviews:

   You can be spiritual without being religious. I think religious . . . would be more specific. The faith is more specific, certain doctrines. Spiritual would be really general, wider. I think that’s how you can be spiritual without being religious. Maybe even be religious without being spiritual. Show up for church and go through the motions. (78)

As religious institutions are perceived as meaningless structures, boomers look elsewhere for meaning: “. . . some of them do more than just drop out of the churches and synagogues; they turn to serious metaphysical quests on their own in hopes of finding a more fulfilling way of believing and living” (79).

Reginald Bibby argues much the same thing for the Canadian context in his sociological study Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada (1993). Building on his earlier study Fragmented Gods (1987), he concludes, based on quantitative sociological data, that though the exodus from religious institutions (he speaks mainly of churches) continues, there exists a very high level of intrigue with mystery and meaning. He identifies contemporary cultural conditions as “ideal for religion to have an important place in the lives of Canadians,” despite the fact that “religious groups across the country are in a state of decline” (1993, 179). His analysis of more current statistical data in his third book in the series, Restless Gods (2002), confirms the trends he identified earlier; the strong majority of Canadians believe in some kind of transcendent (i.e., empirically unverifiable, and not based in human, everyday life) notions of justice, hope, and order (177-178). Almost 75% of Canadians surveyed for Project Canada 2000 (headed by Bibby) acknowledge that they have “spiritual needs,” 70% say spirituality is important to them,
and 60% state that they see themselves as a “spiritual person” (178). This, though, does not translate to participation in established religious institutions in Canada: “Canadians may be hungering for the gods but that is hardly to say they are hungering for the churches” (183).

Robert Fuller summarizes the feeling of those who are ‘spiritual but not religious’ in his aptly titled work *Spiritual but not Religious* (2001):

They feel a tension between their personal spirituality and membership in a conventional religious organization. Most of them value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and an experimental approach to religion. They often find established institutions stifling. Many go so far as to view organized religion as the major enemy of authentic spirituality. Genuine spirituality, they believe, has to do with personal efforts to achieve greater harmony with the sacred. For them spirituality has to do with private reflection and private experience – not public ritual. (4)

Fuller argues that this distinction is not new, however. He traces the ‘spiritual but not religious’ movement in the U.S. from the “eclectic” beliefs of Colonial Americans, through movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries such as the Universalists, Freemasons, Swedenborgians, Transcendentalists, spiritualists, and Theosophists, among others; what he calls a “tradition of unchurched spirituality in America” (11).

Increased attention to the dimension of ‘spirituality’ has led some scholars to attempt the difficult task of clarifying the myriad ways the term is understood and used. Walter Principe’s 1983 article “Toward defining spirituality” traces the usage from the earliest sense of ’spirituality’ (from the Latin *spiritus*), including the biblical usage (Greek *pneuma*). Today, however, as Jeremy Carette and Richard King point out, “There are perhaps few words in the English language as vague and wooly as the notion of ’spirituality’” (2005, 30).

Though I offered my own working definition of the term, and in fact deliberately did not impose that definition on my participants, the nebulous nature of the term can be problematic in
attempts to analyze the phenomenon. Brian Zinnbauer, Kenneth Pargament, and a team of clinical and social psychologists attempt to offer clarification in their article “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy” (1999). They identify three problems with the inconsistency of definitions of the term ‘spirituality’:

First, without a clearer conception of what the terms mean, it is difficult to know what researchers and participants attribute to these terms. Second, a lack of consistency in defining the terms impairs communication within the social scientific study of religion and across other disciplines interested in the two concepts. Third, without common definitions within social scientific research it becomes difficult to draw general conclusions from various studies. (550)

While these observations are no doubt accurate, it is difficult to propose a solution without imposing a universal definition. And in fact, despite a highly technical and sometimes dizzying presentation of statistical analysis, the authors reach remarkably obvious conclusions:

First, there is evidence to suggest that the terms religiousness and spirituality describe, in part, different concepts. [. . .]

A second conclusion is that although religiousness and spirituality appear to describe different concepts, they are not fully independent. [. . .]

A third conclusion is that, despite the finding that 93% of respondents identified themselves as spiritual (i.e., endorsed either the “I am religious and spiritual” or “I am spiritual but not religious” item), and 78% identified themselves as religious, there were group differences in self-rated religiousness and spirituality, and variation in the definitions of these terms . . . Thus, although nearly all participants called themselves spiritual, and many participants identified themselves as religious, different meanings have been attributed to these terms. To say that members of one group rate themselves as more spiritual than another group is not very informative without knowledge of what spirituality means to each group. Likewise, it is difficult to interpret differences within groups or among individuals in these self-ratings without explicit understanding of the meanings attributed to the terms. (561-562)

In other words, the authors quantitatively show that we cannot be sure what ‘spirituality’ means unless we ask people, and this is likely to differ from person to person or group to group. “The
findings of this study,” state the authors, “illustrate the necessity for researchers to recognize the many meanings attributed to religiousness and spirituality by different religious and cultural groups, and the different ways in which these groups consider themselves religious and/or spiritual” (562). It appears that the fuzzy, for sound scientific reasons, should remain fuzzy.

This, I think, more than anything explains why the participants in my project, though very closely sharing environmental values, each have their own comfort levels in embracing or rejecting the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ as self-identifiers; each, naturally, has his or her own understanding of what these terms entail.

Of course, we can and ought to situate usage of the terms in their socio-historical contexts. As Carette and King state: “There is no view from nowhere – no Archimedian point outside of history – from which one could determine a fixed and universal meaning for the term ‘spirituality’” (2005, 3). In their work Selling Spirituality (2005), Carette and King argue that ‘spirituality’ cannot be understood today without consideration of its rampant commodification (a notion I will return to in the final chapter). Further, Pamela Klassen argues that the freedom of individual spirituality, the ‘authenticity’ of the autonomous (spiritual) self, should not be falsely presumed as the ‘natural’ state of being; again, this idea or understanding has historical and social context. Drawing from historian T.J. Jackson Lears’ argument for the development of a “therapeutic” mode of religion in the 20th-century U.S., Klassen states:

Today, practitioners of North American religions are drawn necessarily into a culture in which choice is just as important, if not more important, than tradition. Ironically, even many of those turning to tradition are making a choice to leave more liberal churches or synagogues in favor of “traditional” ones – as many Orthodox jews and traditional Catholics show. However, this celebration of the self in spirituality – reaching the “deepest” self by “authentically” choosing one’s faith – needs to be historically and culturally situated. Paying attention to external
influences upon what is considered spiritual or . . . “natural,” like gender norms, consumer culture, and the media, does not render individual understandings of the self or the body false. Doing so does, however, grant an important perspective on why people make the choices they do. Such a perspective also questions just how free is choice in North America. (2001, 67-68)

Modern understandings of the self within contemporary technological society will be examined in subsequent chapters.²

Indeed, even the idea of ‘spiritual but not religious’ being an entirely personalized phenomenon can be problematic in describing a catch-all turning from more traditional religious participation and expression. Laurel Zwissler, building from Klassen’s observations in the context of home birthing, argues in her article “Spiritual, but Religious: ‘Spirituality’ Among Religiously Motivated Feminist Activists” (2007) that ‘spirituality’ has become a more comfortable, universal term in public space (at least amongst her participant groups, spanning Catholic, United Church, and Neo-Pagan feminist activists). “Within social justice activist circles,” she states, “the language of ‘spirituality’ becomes useful in talking across institutional and ideological boundaries. While ‘religion’ is too limited, linked to public behaviour and institutionalization, ‘spirituality’ becomes the lingua franca” (66).

This barely scratches the surface of important and insightful commentaries on the nature of ‘spirituality’ versus ‘religion’ in contemporary Western society; numerous others could be cited.³ All confirm what modest trends emerged from my own ethnography; ‘spirituality,’ as a contemporary indicator of self-actualization and commitment to something larger than material

²As we shall see, such a clear-cut distinction between the culture of choice on the one hand and tradition on the other can be challenged, depending on how we understand the notion of ‘tradition.’

³See, for instance: Roof (1999); Wuthnow (1992, 1998); Todd (1996); Thomas (2006); McGuire (2003); Schneider (2003); Helminiak (2006).
society, has become a more comfortable term than ‘religion,’ though one entirely subject to
variances of individual interpretation. This can be seen in particular in some of the written
responses to interview questions.

**Written-response interviews**

In most ways, the responses to written interview questions mirrored the trends identified
in the prominent literature. Participants all provided very similar definitions of both ‘religion’ and
‘spirituality,’ reflecting what might be understood as a common secular perspective. This is not to
imply, however, that they were merely repeating definitions they had been given; all indications
were that participants had carefully considered each of their responses. The definitions were
perhaps unsurprising: religion is something fixed, organized, and dogmatic, whereas spirituality is
personal, fluid, and not necessarily formally ritualized. Take the following example:

“Religion” involves and is centered around an authoritative and regimented
infrastructure, whereas “spirituality” is a personal sphere that can be broadened
through special training . . .

“Spirituality” is more gentle and caring than “religion,” since it is less complicated.
Religion necessarily involves money, while spirituality does not necessarily.
Religion can be very polar in nature (good vs. evil, heaven vs. hell), while
spirituality encompasses the beholder’s interests, passions, morals and beliefs in a
non-linear way.

The structure of the question led to a comparative set of definitions; this, however, is the most
common way for people to express some acknowledgment of the role of the non-material or
transcendent in people’s lives (perhaps their own) outside of the perceived rigidity of traditional
religion.

In one case, spirituality was explicitly linked with ethics:
I have spent some time thinking about what spirituality might mean but, in the end, I have not been able to find a clear meaning for this term. One might start by saying that it is a disposition that is manifest[ed] by people when they engage in spiritual activities. One might also say that spirituality is a disposition which spiritual people manifest. These statements call for explanation of the meaning of the terms spiritual activities and spiritual people. I suppose that many people might say that people manifest this disposition when they engage in religious practices. This however is not something that I am inclined to say. I say this because I think that often people can be engaging in highly unethical behavior when engaging in religious practices. I wouldn’t want to say that engaging in such behavior is a manifestation of spirituality, for example, a religious congregation engaging in praying etc. can be at the same time, engaging in racial discrimination or anti-Semitism. Thus, being religious is not necessarily being spiritual. Engaging in religious practices is not necessarily the same as manifesting spirituality.

I guess that you might conclude that when [I use] the terms spirituality or spiritual, the activities or people to which [I attach] those terms must be consistent with activities or people who [I deem] to be fundamentally ethical. I think that that is a correct conclusion. I am unsure whether this connection between the uses of these terms holds generally.

There was often a tone of condescension or other negative judgment in the definition of religion. This, I believe, is more or less consistent with the general view of those who do not regularly engage in religious activities.

When asked whether or not they perceive a difference between being ‘religious’ and being ‘spiritual,’ again the responses were familiar: without exception, all participants distinguish the two in some (usually quite similar) way. For example:

I feel that if you are religious, you are following the belief systems of your religious organization. If you are being spiritual, you are living your life while being conscious of some higher force, other than what is apparent to the naked eye.

The implication here, echoed in other written responses, is that spirituality involves more self-reflection and thoughtfulness, as opposed to strictly following a set of rules. This, needless to say, would no doubt be challenged by religious adherents; it is nonetheless the predominant point
of view of the participants. And it is not exclusively the view of those who are not religious:

There is a difference between the two, mainly that one has its basis in external practice, while the other has its foundation in internal feeling. I come from a very religious family, attending church regularly, believing in God, and following the regulations laid out in the Bible and practicing the rituals. On the other hand, a friend of mine is deeply spiritual, not practicing any set ritual or religion, but feeling within herself to be very connected to the world, and to God, in her own way, through herself.

There are clearly also points where ‘being religious’ and ‘being spiritual’ intersect, as acknowledged by several participants. This related to some kind of deference to the transcendent, or the unknowable; usually a personal commitment. While this can happen within a religious setting, it need not necessarily:

Being spiritual is a personal way of life. Being religious can be the same, but it can also be as simple as going to a house of worship and sleeping through the service.

The implication in some cases was that religion with spirituality is somehow fuller, more genuine; without, religion is empty and (merely) formalistic. Spirituality, on the other hand, need not be bound by rules of conductbelief.

As to whether people specifically see themselves as being ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual,’ this answer perhaps best exemplifies my sense of how many members of the SCC would respond (in variations), and could have been taken from Roof’s field notes:

I don’t consider myself a religious person, although I was baptised as a child and received my first communion in the Anglican church. I attended church services and Sunday school for years, ending at age 14. Even at a young age, I remember being in church and not believing in the words that I was saying in prayer and in the songs that we sang.

At times, I do consider myself a spiritual person. It is usually when I feel connected with the earth that I feel the most spiritual. And in the summertime, when I am happy. When I am depressed I’m not feeling very spiritual.
Interestingly, in one case, despite regular attendance to church, the respondent eschewed calling herself ‘religious,’ preferring instead ‘spiritual’:

I do not consider myself a religious person although I worship in an established church, because to me, the term has negative connotations. Spirituality, on the other hand encompasses a love and appreciation of nature, an emphasis on the positive and trying not to leave too large a footprint.

And there were, of course, some who consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual:

I am an atheist, having given up any belief in a supreme being in my youth. I have also given considerable thought to the ‘spiritual’ feelings that we all get at some times. I have come to the conclusion that these feelings are a creation of the human mind rather than any reflection of reality. I therefore consider myself neither religious nor spiritual.

**Connection to ethics**

An understanding of what it means to be ‘spiritual but not religious,’ in the context of social justice movements, is incomplete without an account of ethics. Ethics and spirituality are inextricably linked, as I will argue, in the commitment to a ‘higher’ good. This, in fact, will be the subject of the bulk of my project, examined in more detail in later chapters looking at the construction of meaning and moral philosophy. For now, however, let me again turn to preliminary indications of this connection from my fieldwork.

All interviewees (and all survey respondents) think of themselves as ethical people. This seemed by and large to be understood as thinking and acting according to a standard of right and wrong, and being thoughtful about others and the world around them. A good example is the following response:

Why do I think I’m an ethical person? Well I think carefully about some ethical issues and try to determine what is the right position to take. Then I try, to some
degree, to make my actions conform to what I think is the right thing to do. I try to avoid doing what is clearly wrong and to do what is clearly right. I believe that on the whole, my character conforms to traits or dispositions that, in my view, are ethical, e.g., being honest, sympathetic to others, fair.

The implication in each response was that being ethical involves having a set moral compass, and trying to be guided by it. The further implication, I believe, is that there is a higher good; ‘higher,’ because it is grounded in something beyond the ebb and flow of society. While certainly acknowledging the role of social/cultural mores and upbringing in the formulation of a general ethical framework, respondents would not, I believe it safe to say, add the proviso “It is the right thing to do according to society.” Particularly in relation to environmental issues, the sense I got from participants was that their ethics were precisely not conditional in this way. I would in fact venture to say that even environmentalists who believe ethics are entirely socially developed still adhere to a transcendent notion of good/evil, right/wrong; this is something I will unpack when looking at the theories of Segundo and Taylor in particular.

There were a variety of responses as to whether there is a difference between being an ethical person and a religious/spiritual one. Most people made the point that one can be ethical and not religious, and vice-versa; but there was also a general acknowledgment that these things tend to be interrelated. Some were hard on religion in particular, noting that religious dogma does not always coincide with what they would consider ‘ethical’ teaching. Spirituality, being defined as something more personal, has more of a natural affinity with ethics (also understood by participants as something distinctly personal).

One interesting response highlighted a perceived distinction between the origins of ethics and spirituality:
Again it comes down to faith and a sense of there being something that exists beyond me, something that I don't quite understand. Being ethical is a human thing, whereas religion/spirituality comes from a deeper place I think.

This was echoed in another participant’s response:

The difference between an ethical individual and a spiritual one is that an individual can be ethical without a belief in something bigger and more encompassing than the self.

This, I think, is not an uncommon distinction. While indeed ethics can be learned by rote as anything else, I argue that “belief in something bigger” can in fact be precisely what links ethics – or at least, certain kinds of ethics – and spirituality. Very few people were able to specifically articulate where their sense of ethics comes from, other than pointing to cultural/social factors, including upbringing. Though none of the respondents stated it as such, again it would seem that, in the context of environmentalism in particular, what makes an action or belief intrinsically right or wrong, or what makes something inherently valuable (such as nature as a whole), also “comes down to faith and a sense of there being something that exists beyond me, something that I don’t quite understand.” Again, I will return to this idea in more detail in later chapters (in particular, Chapter Two).

Responses to the question of if and how a sense of religion/spirituality and/or ethics affects participants’ attitudes toward the environment, not surprisingly, were varied. Those who consider themselves religious or spiritual linked this closely with their attitudes towards the environment:

My spirituality connects me with the natural world such that degradation and disrespect to the natural world never fails to make my eyes water. The corresponding ethics instilled in me signify that I cannot ignore the hurt that the natural world is suffering nor the insolence with which it is treated.

Others who do not identify themselves as religious or spiritual referred only to their sense of
ethics, which was, naturally, linked to their attitude towards the environment. The former is what I was particularly interested in; responses confirmed that indeed all those who consider themselves spiritual link this sense with their environmental ethics, in ways that make the distinctions between ethics and spirituality less than clear.

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My ethnographic findings, then, largely echo theory in the literature on the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon. It is perhaps useful to briefly summarize these findings here before moving on to further theoretical analysis.

First and foremost, as the survey statistics show and the interviews confirm, members of the SCC very clearly distinguish between religion and spirituality, and have very common definitions of each. Most identify in some capacity with the latter, and only a minority with the former. Even those who shy away from the term ‘spirituality,’ however, sometimes use language with regard to their view of nature and environmental ethics that might be construed or defined as spiritual by others; words such as ‘miracle,’ ‘sacred,’ ‘wonder,’ and so on.

All participants consider themselves to some degree ethical, meaning that they have a distinct understanding of good/evil, right/wrong, and attempt to orient their lives according to this understanding. Though only some explicitly connect ethics with spirituality (and even fewer with religion), there are indications that both ethics and spirituality share the common trait of being vague to entirely unexplainable in origin, and are rooted in some form of the transcendent, with a notion of a ‘higher’ good. This, I believe, gives a starting point for what I will explore in more detail throughout the rest of this work.

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*See Appendix 1.*
What does distinguish ethics from spirituality, at the very least, is the association of the former with a more public, shared realm of values. As careful as some of the participants are to not judge others absolutely, all interviewees indicated that they in some sense participated in environmental values, things to which they could orient their own moral compasses. This is not to deny the personal nature of ethics – indeed, participants recognized the importance of both one’s particular upbringing and one’s own ‘path’ or development – but rather to emphasize that the source of environmental values is not wholly within, but based in something outside of the self.

Spirituality, on the other hand, was spoken of by most as more of a personal journey, one that is almost entirely private. Perhaps because of the clear opposition made between religion and spirituality, there is an emphasis on fluidity and personal choice, and on not imposing one’s spirituality on others in any way. The tendency toward this belief shows up clearly in the survey statistics showing the importance of spirituality in most people’s own lives, but the generally infrequent selection of religion/spirituality as a cause of environmental problems, or as something to which environmentalists should appeal. It is thought of as a more private affair than ethics.5

The short-term strategy for the environmental movement advocated by most of the participants indicates an emphasis on pragmatism; whatever works in moving the cause forward. This can mean appealing to health, safety, economics, or even religion; whatever helps encourage environmental sustainability. It also acknowledges that it can be very difficult (and in some cases

5This should not necessarily be considered part and parcel with the process of secularization (examined below); see, for instance, José Casanova disputation of the idea of ‘privatized’ religion as part of secularization in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994).
As we shall see in the next chapter, this relates to Segundo’s point that as adults we become ‘set’ in our values, or what he calls ‘fait hé’, so that it becomes rarer for people to significantly change their meaning-structures. This is more gradual, and starts with education of the young.

Finally, though as yet I have not mentioned technology, participants’ attitudes toward it are also fairly uniform. Though certainly seen by most as problematic, technology is still generally understood as a neutral tool, able to be used for good (with such ‘green’ technologies as solar power, hybrid cars, etc.). Technology has both accelerated environmental destruction, and helped with its ease. This is something that I will return to in more depth in the later chapter on the nature of technological society, and the place of environmental ethics within it.

Secularization thesis and the sociology of religion

An understanding the notion of ‘spiritual but not religious,’ and how the participants’ responses relate, is incomplete without an acknowledgment of the broader debate concerning secularization, as particularly taken up in the sociology of religion. Though in subsequent chapters I follow a different theoretical path than the sociology of religion, it is important to note, albeit briefly, the wider forum in which the ‘spiritual but not religious’ discussion is held.

Sociologists of religion have lamented the relegation of religion to a place of unimportance

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6 As we shall see in the next chapter, this relates to Segundo’s point that as adults we become ‘set’ in our values, or what he calls ‘faith,’ so that it becomes rarer for people to significantly change their meaning-structures.

7 My choosing not to focus on literature within the sociology of religion is in no way a judgment on the value of the insights generated in this field (or subfield); rather, as will be seen, my interest is more in the formulation of the individual’s environmental ethic than on general social trends. A philosophical approach seems to me better suited for this particular project.
as an object of mainstream social science, something which has been perceived as threatening the relevance and credibility of the field itself. In the recent past, however, there has been marked optimism, given the sociological data (cited earlier) confirming that religion has not, in fact, simply faded quietly into obscurity. The events of September 11th, naturally, have thrust religion (for unfortunate reasons) back into the ‘limelight’ of social scientific inquiry.

The most widespread discussion and debate over the place of religion in society has been linked to the secularization thesis, whether in support or defiance of this line of argument. If nothing else, the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon, as confirmed by my fieldwork, indicates that secularization, defined as the gradual disappearance (or at least complete marginalization) of religion, is a highly problematic idea at best; and indeed, the tide seems to have turned against this theory. More than simply a debate over church attendance, at issue is the place of religious discourse in secular society. James Beckford (1990) argues that “contrary to received wisdom, the changing structure of individual societies and of the near-global system of nation states has indeed created circumstances in which religious discourse, if not religious organizations, may enjoy greater cultural significance for the perception of social problems than has been possible since the flowering of industrial societies in the late nineteenth century” (6). In advanced industrial societies, he says, “the discourses of social protest reflect a turn toward culture and meaning” (7). As such, global social movements (such as environmentalism) have “new-found

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8This has been a burning issue for several decades; see, for instance, Martin (1966), Beckford (1985, 1990, and 2000), Serkat and Ellison (1999) Ebaugh (2002), and Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto (2002).

9This has been evidenced, among other things, by some prominent early theorists modifying their positions in response to a clearly identifiable surge in interest in ‘spirituality,’ variously defined; most famously, perhaps, Peter Berger’s change of heart between The Sacred Canopy (1967) and The Desecularization of the World (1999).
religious significance,” but

it does not arise from traditional values and teachings; rather, it emerges from a characteristically nondoctrinal and unconventional spirituality which borrows only selectively from formal theologies. This new spirituality conveys a strong sense of urgency about global problems. It is so remarkably inclusive in scope that it should be called the “global ethic.” (8)

This is different from the notion of invisible religion (as put forward particularly by Luckmann [1967]); it is “a new form of increasingly visible, if not church-oriented, religiosity or spirituality that favours synoptic, holistic, and global perspectives on issues transcending the privatized self and the individual state” (9). The sociological study of religion, then, according to Beckford, must include understanding religious/spiritual discourse in response to social problems as well as understanding religion itself as a kind of ‘social problem’ (i.e., of problematic place/status in modern industrial societies). The former, of course, is what particularly interests me here.

I do not intend to wade into the debate over how best to measure and analyze the effect of secularization (or the lack thereof). As Mark Chaves (1994) notes, “how we understand secularization’s object – religion – has a dramatic effect on how we understand secularization” (750); and certainly, there are many different yet equally valid ways of understanding religion. Chaves himself, following Bryan Wilson, proposes that the insights of secularization need not be abandoned (despite waning credibility), but re-focussed on religious authority rather than religion (750). This is opposed to Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge’s (1985) argument for the ‘market’ model of secularization as a cyclical process; a “universal phenomenon always occurring in all religious economies” (Stark, cited in Chaves 1994, 758) that sees the rise and fall of particular religious institutions and movements depending on the need for religious ‘compensators’ (future, otherworldly rewards in exchange for religious piety).
Stark has taken one of the most pronounced positions against the secularization thesis. In his article “Secularization, R.I.P.” (1999), for example, he identifies and systematically refutes five characteristics of secularization prophesies: that modernization is the “causal engine,” driving a “long-term, gradual, and relatively constant trend of religious decline” (251); that individual belief is declining, in addition to a growing divide between church and state; that science has “the most deadly implications for religion” (253); that secularization is an “absorbing state” (253), and irreversible; and that it applies globally, in all contexts, and not just to Christianity (on which most of the empirical observations are based). The secularization thesis, he says, in agreement with David Martin, “has been inconsistent with plain facts from the very start” (254). Rather than secularization, sociological focus should be on religious change, which is certainly real (269). He concludes that “after nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper ‘requiescat in pace’” (270).

A complete rejection of secularization nonetheless glosses over genuine changes in the conditions of belief between ‘secular’ modernity and pre-modernity. This is the direction Charles Taylor takes in his voluminous recent work A Secular Age (2007): the change he wishes to define and trace, he states, “is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (3). At the heart of modern secularism, he argues, is the possibility of ultimate fulfilment exclusively from humanism; from within. His “one-line” description of the difference between the pre-secular and secular age in the West is that “a secular age is one which the eclipse
of all goals beyond human understanding becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people” (19-20).

This is but a small representation of the current debate over secularization. 11 There have certainly been changes in role and manifestation of religious authority and institutions in society, and in the conditions of belief, yet religion remains an important part of human life. Suffice it to say that religion (and religiosity), contrary to earlier predictions, has not gone quietly into the night, though it has undoubtedly altered in expression and form; emphasis on spirituality is perhaps the most readily identifiable example of this. 12

Environmentalism as ‘secular spirituality’

Bearing in mind that some participants eschewed the term ‘spirituality’ as much as ‘religion,’ it may be helpful to understand their environmental ethics, and commitment to ‘outside’ (or, as I will argue, transcendent) notions of the good, as a form of ‘secular spirituality.’ Again, this term is not unproblematic; at the very least, it leaves unanswered the exact demarcation between ‘secular’ and ‘non-secular’ spirituality, other than to somewhat simplistically draw the line between spirituality articulated within or outside of a traditional religious framework (what of, for instance, my participants who acknowledged the influence of tradition in their upbringing,


12 Significant work analyzing contemporary forms of religiosity/spirituality has also been done with regard to new religious movements, though it is beyond the scope of my project to examine this research; see, for example, Hannigan (1990), Dawson (ed.) (2003), Lewis (2003), and Lucas and Robbins (eds.) (2004).
but are no longer actively involved in the religion?). Like the editors and contributors of the volume *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (1996), however, I assume “the meaningfulness of ascribing a spiritual dimension to some secular beliefs and behaviors” (Van Ness 1996, 1). Peter Van Ness offers this working definition of spirituality: “… the spiritual dimension of life is the embodied task of realizing one’s truest self in the context of reality apprehended as cosmic totality. It is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is; it is a quest that can be furthered by adopting appropriate spiritual practices and by participating in relevant communal rituals” (5). Vagueness aside, this definition essentially means that to be spiritual is to *think bigger than oneself and one’s society*; to acknowledge and in some way honour the totality of life and the cosmos as more than the sum of its materials. This, I think, would be a fair assessment of the depth of environmental values held by participants in my fieldwork.

One of the volume’s contributors, Dwight Hopkins, sees social justice as linked to spirituality: “The effort and effect of transforming the society to which one belongs in a holistic direction – toward peace, equality, and genuine democracy – can also transform individuals. It can give them a more vital and creative sense of well-being. This I think is the faith of persons who identify social justice struggle as an integral part of their spiritual lives” (1996, 356). Holmes Rolston III extends this understanding to scientific inquiry, arguing that the ‘fine-tuning’ of nature, so precariously but perfectly balanced for life, inevitably must be understood, on some level, spiritually (1996, 388). He says that we have ample reason to understand the Earth spiritually:

Yet is it so amiss to see this home biosphere as the sphere of divinity? Consider all
the complexity and diversity, integrity, richness, natural history, and cultural history – the whole storied natural and cultural history of our planet. Say, if you like, that Earth is only a big ‘rock pile,’ mere matter, but, as [Paleontologist and anthropologist Loren] Eiseley insisted, when we consider the story these rocks spin, it must indeed be plain to the materialist that matter contains dreadful powers. Really, the story is little short of a series of “miracles,” wondrous, fortuitous events, unfolding of potential; and when Earth’s most complex product, *Homo sapiens*, becomes intelligent enough to reflect over this cosmic wonderland, everyone is left stuttering about the mixtures of accident and necessity out of which we have evolved. Nobody, though, has much doubt that this is a precious place, a pearl in a sea of black mystery. Earth could be the ultimate object of duty, short of God; and if one cannot get clear about God, there is ample and urgent call to reverence the Earth. (407-408)

Voiced in this poetic tribute is an assumption made, I would argue, by most environmentalists (and certainly by all the participants in my study\(^\text{13}\)): that nature has inherent or ontic value, and that this demands recognition. Rolston continues:

No other species can be either responsible for or religious toward this planet, but *Homo sapiens* reaches a responsibility that assumes spiritual dimensions . . . In a planetary, environmental age, spirituality requires combining nature and grace at new levels of insight and intensity. Nature is grace, whatever more grace may also be. The geophysical and biological laws, the evolutionary and ecological history, the creativity within the natural system we inherit, and the values these generate are the ground of our being, not just the ground under our feet. (410)

Such responsibility goes beyond physical survival, though it includes it; as biologist (and critic of religion) E.O. Wilson says, “There can be no purpose more inspiriting” (cited in Rolston 1996, 410). This includes but goes beyond *respect*: states Rolston, “the line between respect for life and reverence for life is one that I doubt you can always recognize” (410).

Finally, Lois Daly argues that the idea of secular spirituality provides a useful way to understand contemporary environmental activism (1996, 445). She states that “taking seriously

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\(^{13}\)For instance, the most overwhelmingly affirmative response to any question on the survey came for the question “Do you think nature has value in and of itself?”, with fully 87% of participants circling 8 out of 8 in agreement.
the spiritual dimension of secular environmental movements helps explain their vigor despite the overwhelming opposition found in the dominant economic, political, social, and perhaps even religious paradigms operative in the late twentieth century” (446). Daly associates secular environmental spirituality exclusively with a biocentric perspective; this, I think, underemphasizes the uniquely human capacity for ethics and spirituality (making the issue by definition anthropocentric).

*   *   *

While we now have a clearer idea of how the participants’ ideas of spirituality and religion can be situated in the larger scholarly discourse on the subject, and how we may begin to understand the place of these ideas in the participants’ environmentalism with the notion of ‘secular spirituality,’ the exact nature of their environmental ethics remains elusive. We are not necessarily closer to explaining specifically how and why environmentalism represents and reflects the changing nature of both ethics and religiosity in contemporary Western society. To do so goes beyond the scope of ethnography, listening to people’s different understandings of these ideas, though I believe it must begin (and perhaps end) here. To dig deeper, however, I propose turning to more detailed anthropological, philosophical, and sociological frameworks of analysis of the construction and understanding of meaning- and values-systems in contemporary society. Such will be the project of subsequent chapters.
Chapter 2
Examining the Structure of Meaning: Segundo’s ‘Faith’ and ‘Ideologies’

[Learning ethical values] starts with the smallest unit, and you know, people in a family can tend to act in similar ways, up to a certain point . . . And perhaps that’s up to the individual, when, you know, the son or daughter takes a different path than the parents, and they’re on their own, they’re setting out different things, or if it’s just a matter of . . . I think it’s just, a lot of what’s instilled as right and wrong in you when you’re younger is what does stick with you, and I think as you grow, that’s often challenged, and you make your decisions on where you’ve - you know, how to act based on what information you’ve learned in the past, but also what you’ve been exposed to in your regular, everyday life.

-Jeremy, SCC member and volunteer

Having examined the responses of the participants and offered some preliminary analysis, I would like to turn to a more theoretical analysis of the creation of meaning and ethical orientation in modernity. As the above quote indicates, it can be difficult to pinpoint origins, both social and individual, of our values. I intend to explore in more depth the basics of what it means to be ethical, to create and have meaning-structure, and to act upon it.

An attempt to tackle the very nature of ethics in this way seems an overly ambitious project, given the magnitude of the tradition of thought and body of literature on the topic. My aim is not to present thorough review of this tradition. Rather, I have chosen to begin the process in this chapter by adopting the approach taken, and (by and large) the conclusions drawn, by liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo, particularly in his 1984 (1982 in original) book Faith and Ideologies (Fe e Ideologia, Volume 1 of his series El Hombre de Hoy Ante Jesus de Nazaret). His phenomenological method in this text strikes me as an appropriate and convincing way to launch an investigation into how we adopt, understand, and ultimately live out our values and structure of meaning, what I take to be the very essence of our ethics. I will broaden the exploration to include other theoretical frameworks in subsequent chapters.
Segundo, born in Uruguay, was a leading voice in the Latin American liberation theology movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although Gustavo Gutiérrez is often cited as the ‘father’ of liberation theology, Segundo was one of its most important systematizers, and arguably pushed it to its most startling reaches.\footnote{Marsha Hewitt, for example, in her analysis of Segundo’s method, concludes that his logical extension of liberation theology leads ultimately to the “negation of theology” (see Hewitt, \textit{From Theology to Social Theory: Juan Luis Segundo and the Theology of Liberation} [1990]).} Influenced by both Vatican II and the Medellín conference of Latin American bishops, he aggressively challenged the sterility of traditional theology in the face of an urgent need to effect political, cultural and social change in impoverished and violence-ridden Latin American countries. Appalled by the complicity of the Church with some of the corrupt and oppressive regimes, Segundo wrote articulately on the need for theology to be a liberating \textit{force}, historically active, rather than the bland intellectualizing of an empty religious structure.

What interests me here, however, are not the specifics of his theology \textit{per se}, although it is impossible to understand Segundo entirely outside of a theological context. Most of the secondary literature on Segundo is an attempt to analyze him theologically; how he understands the word of God, and how his interpretation impacts the modern, believing Christian. Although mine is not a theological project, it does not preclude insights from a theological mind. Segundo himself goes to great lengths in \textit{Faith and Ideologies} to make it clear that his analysis applies to Christians and non-Christians alike; and, more broadly, to both religious adherents and non-adherents. ‘Faith’ and ‘ideologies,’ in his description, are universal anthropological dimensions. As he intends his work to be accessible to believers and non-believers, it is justifiable to take his theory out of its wider theological context and apply it within the present one.
In this chapter, then, I will highlight particular aspects of Segundo’s thought that are of significance to better understanding the construction of meaning, and offer some preliminary analysis of how this helps illumine the nature of environmental ethics. Segundo analyzes the ‘building blocks’ of meaning-structures, through his notions of ‘faith’ and ‘ideologies’; the former in particular involves reliance on transcendent data, and is an indispensable component of all human life (both for those traditionally religious, and not). I will explore the link between faith in a tradition of ‘referential witnesses’ and ‘secular’ ethics such as environmental ones, and whether a healthy balance between the twin dimensions of ‘faith’ and ‘ideologies’ can be found in environmentalism.

It is these insights, specific to Segundo’s thought, that draw me to him in particular as the focus of this part of my work. Though the later thinkers to be examined each fill a specific niche in my overall project, and are clearly prominent representatives in their respective fields, Segundo seems a rather odd choice, as a theologian, to help lay out the foundations of meaning-structure we adopt and live by as individuals. To a certain extent, the choice of which authors’ theories to rely on is inherently arbitrary. We come across or are introduced to a particular work that strikes us differently from others, in that it offers a clear and insightful take on an issue of specific concern to us, sometimes unwittingly. This is precisely so with the Segundo’s notion of faith and ideologies for my project here. Though clearly writing in great detail about the relationship between faith and ideology in the broader context of his struggle to consolidate the Marxist slant of young Latin American political idealists and revolutionaries (particularly in the 1970s and 80s) with Christian theology, Segundo understands his effort as helping lay the foundations for sustainable and emancipatory traditions in his troubled part of the world. As such, he very much
‘starts from scratch,’ assuming nothing, and deliberately not limiting his discussion to either Christians or even Latin Americans until later on in his work (parts I do not turn to for guidance here).

I believe there are parallels between Segundo’s program to better articulate liberation theology and social justice movements in Latin America and environmental ethics, as I will explore, through his method of re-evaluating and understanding anew the basic construction of meaning- and efficacy-structures. That this work is inherently basic, or foundational, I think justifies my placement of an analysis of Segundo’s thought early on in my theoretical discussion. It provides a ground to work on, and leaves room for refinement. The thinkers I examine in later chapters, I fully admit, provide more nuanced treatments of ethics and society. Though the challenge of such refinement to Segundo’s basic premises is instructive, it does not, as I will argue, invalidate some of Segundo’s most basic and helpful insights.

Further, as mentioned, Segundo’s arguments about religion in particular, as a tradition of ‘referential witnesses,’ provide an important parallel for contemporary, more ‘secular’ forms of ethics, such as environmentalism; particularly, the establishment of core ‘green’ values that can be passed from generation to generation in the same manner as traditionally religious ones. This further links religion/spirituality and ethics, an exploration of which the beginnings were laid in the previous chapter.

Segundo’s outline is thus in many ways useful in this particular project. After examining his core concepts, I will conclude the chapter with a specific look at the implications of his theory for environmental ethics.
**Faith and ideologies**

Although the bulk of Segundo’s thoughts on the subject are contained in *Faith and Ideologies*, he presents an earlier, less fully developed theory on the relationship of faith and ideologies in a chapter of another influential work, *The Liberation of Theology* (1976), appropriately titled “Ideologies and Faith.” In it, he foreshadows much of what he elaborates on in his later work. He identifies the problem of the relationship between faith and ideology as an important methodological one for liberation theology; trying to understand how to relate particularly Christian faith with the revolutionary methods needed to liberate Latin America. He states the common perception of the relationship succinctly:

“Faith is not an ideology”: that is a frequent statement from the hierarchy when it launches an attack on liberation theology. “Faith is not an ideology – and what we need now is an ideology”: that is the frequent complaint of younger Christians, who are told to go back to the gospel message but who do not find in it sufficient direction for making a sound political commitment vis-à-vis liberation. “Faith is not an ideology: That is why we hold a Christian faith but a Marxist ideology”: that is the attitude of growing numbers of Christians who have moved or been pushed towards the margins of Latin American life. (1976, 102-103)

These, according to Segundo (at the time of his writing), are the prevailing attitudes towards faith, ideology, and how they relate. His goal is then to reformulate the problem, and arrive at a different understanding of these two key ideas.

This he does more thoroughly in his later volume. Segundo begins *Faith and Ideologies* by again questioning the common definition of the two terms in question; terms, he states, that have been misleading. In the common usage, “a radical division is set up between those human beings who have ‘faith’ on the one hand, and those who structure their lives around some ‘ideology’ on the other hand. And then there is a further group of people who do not seem to
adhere to either alternative, so their lives cannot be neatly classified” (3). The consequent assumption, says Segundo, is “that faith and ideologies, being alternatives, oppose and exclude each other” (3).

Rather than simply recasting the definitions of these terms, Segundo launches into his re-visioning phenomenologically. He examines the construction or adoption of human meaning-structures, introducing his thoughts by way of a literary analysis of Camus’ *Caligula*. By examining the main character’s search for ultimate happiness, Segundo highlights the point that the nature of human free will is such that, when applied to the attainment of some value, “every option which is positive (in intent) becomes limiting (in its result)” (5). He explains: “In other words, to choose one path is to close ourselves off to other paths . . . If we choose to attain a certain value experientially and to go through the mediations necessary to arrive at it, that means we decide to remain forever unfamiliar with the experiences that were waiting for us on other potential roads which we did not take” (5). Segundo thus immediately presents an interesting take on freedom, in that by exercising our free will we inherently restrict ourselves to a particular path. As he states, “freedom is gradually and steadily lost as we use it” (22).

This, of course, is completely unavoidable; even in choosing to remain open to all possibilities, to not plunge into a particular course of action for fear of losing others, one is in fact closing off all other avenues to pursue one (the choice to attempt to remain ‘free’). The inevitability of this is what leads Segundo to speak of it as a fundamental, and primary, anthropological fact in his analysis.
Though Segundo uses the word ‘satisfaction,’ the implication is clearly more than simple physical or material satisfaction; it is the satisfaction of fulfilling or realizing something that one values. A life of severe austerity in the name of spiritual purity, for example, is thus satisfying if valued and achieved.

This fact relates directly to our realization of satisfaction. Because we cannot know the end result of our choices in life, and because the structure of free will dictates that we close off all other possibilities in choosing one, we are faced with the dilemma of how to choose the path to ultimate satisfaction (by comparing potential satisfactions along the way). This is where Segundo introduces his notion of transcendent data. In this is he is not referring to anything explicitly religious, or even to things or beings which transcend this world; he refers simply, and literally, to “data relating to things which [one] cannot personally experience and which, in that sense, [are] beyond [one]” (23). We rely on data that transcend our experience in order to make choices about paths to satisfaction, since we cannot experience all available paths ourselves.

This would seem to be overwhelming, weighing the myriad transcendent data in an attempt to decide on a particular path. Yet, we are not paralyzed by every decision we need to make, agonizing over whether it will ultimately lead to satisfaction. Because we do not have access to all data pertaining to the consequences of a particular action, we must look to others, says Segundo, who have had similar experiences: “. . . only through the experiences of others is it possible for us to have an idea of a satisfactory pathway or choice in any positive way” (6). He puts this second basic anthropological fact of his analysis in a slightly different way: “The fact is that the valuational structure of every human life depends on the referential witnesses in whom we believe” (6).

This gives an inherently social dimension to one of the basic modes of human existence. This social structure of experience is the third decisive fact of Segundo’s analysis (24). It is also

2 Though Segundo uses the word ‘satisfaction,’ the implication is clearly more than simple physical or material satisfaction; it is the satisfaction of fulfilling or realizing something that one values. A life of severe austerity in the name of spiritual purity, for example, is thus satisfying if valued and achieved.
where he introduces the term ‘faith’; we must have faith in others’ valuations, “of testimony to satisfactions inextricably bound up with those people;” in the absence of experiential data (24).

“Only through the experiences of others,” says Segundo, “is it possible for us to have an idea of a satisfactory pathway or choice in any positive way” (6). He elaborates:

... experience points up clearly the basic solidarity of the human species. Experience of effectively realized values are conveyed to us by our fellow human beings. Before we have these experiences ourselves, we perceive their value and their possibilities for satisfaction in and through the experience of others. Thus, faced with the necessary limitedness of our lives, we are all dependent on each other. (6)

Based on his analysis, Segundo argues that “faith, understood in the broadest, secular sense, is an indispensable component, a dimension, of every human life. It is an anthropological dimension” (25). Here he makes it clear that he does not intend the word ‘faith’ in the way it is more commonly understood, i.e., religious faith, but rather in the broader sense of knowledge based on trust rather than on direct or scientifically verifiable experience (25). I will return later to his notion of specifically religious faith; for now, it is enough to emphasize that in this sense faith is a basic, universal dimension of human beings. There is no division between ‘believers’ and ‘nonbelievers’ as there is with the common notion of religious faith. All people “base their values-structure on a type of knowledge that we must call faith” (25).

What this faith does, according to Segundo, is to “structure existence in a meaningful way” (25). It allows us to systematize and prioritize the complex realm of values. Meaning-structure (or values-structure) is necessary in ‘scaling’ our values, which is required in order to at least minimally provide direction on our chosen path: “Our activity must be structured if it is not to be diluted and to suffer from a partial or total loss of effectiveness” (5). At the top of the scale
is a primary or ‘absolute’ value. Faith “hierarchizes what we call ‘values,’ arriving ultimately at one to which it subordinates all the rest. We call that one value ‘absolute,’ not because it is actually realized or because it is an absolute being, but because that value as such, in the life of the person who chose it, is not subordinated to, or conditioned by, any other value. All other values are subordinated to it” (25). ‘Absolute’ in his sense refers to something unconditioned, something a person wishes to achieve for its own sake and not as a means to something else (18). In the case of environmentalists, this would be a healthy, flourishing planet on which the delicate balance of life is maintained, protected and respected by humans. This should never be compromised for the sake of human utility, for example. Segundo says elsewhere in reference to absolute value: “Persons true to themselves will not negotiate it. They will not sell it for any price, even that of their lives. Its loss would be the death of meaning” (1993, 134). This is the essence of what we believe in, and as Segundo notes, it is very difficult for us to articulate. “Even the word ‘value’ used here,” he concedes, “is a convenient abstraction for something that is much more concrete, complex, and personalized” (1984, 26). We saw clearly the difficulty of such articulation in the participants’ accounts in the previous chapter.

Use of the word ‘absolute’ does not, again, restrict Segundo’s point to theists. Since the existence of an absolute value is fundamental to (anthropological) faith, and faith is a universal human dimension, Segundo notes that it is a mistake to hold that people who do not believe in God do not (or cannot) have absolute values. This assumes an erroneous equation of God with the absolute. ‘Absolute’ values are not alterable and dependent on nothing else, but they need not be attached to the divine. Since “every scale of values implies some value that is not conditioned by the rest,” it follows that “something in the decisions of every human being is really absolute
and unconditioned in the strict sense” (63). Absolute value is distinct from Absolute Being.

Segundo is emphatic on this point: “One of the worst mistakes resulting from [the equation of ‘absolute’ with ‘God’] is the assumption that nonbelievers, people who do not have faith in God – or, to use another common expression, people who do not have faith – are human beings destitute of any absolute” (63).

With an absolute value at the core of this meaning-structure, ‘secondary’ values scale according to how in line they are with the primary value: “We must then learn what other values are conducive to the primary value, and to what extent they are; what price we can pay for a given partial achievement of our aim, and what price is so high that it would mean the destruction of the very goal we are seeking” (8). This then brings his analysis to the question of means; or, in other words he uses, method, action, or efficacy. In turning our preferences and choices into reality, we are confronted with what Segundo identifies as his fourth basic fact, “the objective structure of reality” (26). What this means is that we are faced with a reality determined outside of us, one not subject to our prioritizing of values. In determining how best to achieve the realization of a certain value, we are limited by what we can actually do; by natural boundaries, and by the contingencies of historical context. Segundo explains this with the simple example of driving a nail, which is a specific goal one can set for oneself (having determined one’s scale of values): “But in choosing between possible tools – which is to say, in choosing the ‘method’ to use – I must pay attention to the difference in effectiveness that various tools possess for my purpose. I must consider the potential effectiveness of such tools as a hammer or a pliers [sic]” (8).

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3Here I would like to briefly pause in this summary of Segundo’s analysis to anticipate my own interpretation of his theory in light of the work of authors such as Jacques Ellul and George Grant, and in so doing provide an indication of how this summary serves a purpose in setting the framework for my own analysis. What
Concerning the realm of efficacy, Segundo presents a fifth basic fact: “Meaning and efficacy are two different but complementary dimensions” (26). They are inherently bound, but are distinct. He explains this, by way of example, by examining possible explanations of failure. He gives a particular instance:

In the face of an election defeat, it is likely that the defeated candidate will elaborate two lines of thinking more or less simultaneously. On the one hand the candidate will ask himself or herself whether good use was made of all the available means, compatible with his or her aims, to win the support of the masses. On the other hand he or she will probably emphasize a “valuational” explanation of the defeat: he or she did not win because undoubtedly the masses are at the mercy of the first demagogue who appears on the scene; thus the election defeat proves the purity of his or her intentions and methods. In other words, viewing the matter in the light of one’s absolute value, the very meaning of one’s political activity, one prefers to lose this way than to win another way. (9)

This example underlines two distinct sets of criteria relating to the two anthropological dimensions put forth by Segundo. The dimension of efficacy or means he dubs ‘ideology,’ based on the Greek origins of ideas, the nonvaluational realm of things “which we see or perceive (Greek idein), and which we are obliged to work with” (16). As Segundo readily admits, this has the potential to cause even more confusion than his broad use of the term ‘faith.’ Marsha Hewitt

Segundo does not seem to adequately take into account is how means impose themselves on our values; nor does he consider the analysis of technological society provided by Ellul (who wrote his most influential works several years before the publication of Faith and Ideologies), including questioning the notion of ‘neutral’ tools. While Segundo is certainly aware that too much emphasis can be placed on means – this is evident particularly in his warning to the Church (and Christians generally) that blindly adhering to outdated religious structure and law constitutes a dangerous and “dead” form of religious faith – he seems to gloss over the fact that technological means can too readily be taken as values, and thus dictate meaning-structure (while paradoxically being considered ‘value-neutral’). Or, perhaps more accurately, he is inconsistent in his thoughts on the matter; at times he seems to be aware of the modern, technological/scientific conflation of meaning- and efficacy-structures, while at others he insists that faith, the creation of values-structure, is always prior to choosing means. The question of what happens to valuation when ‘the good’ is confused with ‘the most efficient’ remains unanswered in Segundo’s work. The task of elaborating on this line of thought will fall to subsequent chapters.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to accurately continue the summary of Segundo’s presentation of these basic human dimensions, despite my reservations about his underestimation of the role of means and efficacy; these reservations to not undermine the value of his analysis as a whole.
has outlined in detail his failure to adequately explain the context of the debate concerning the notion of ideology (stemming from Marx’s definition) and his (somewhat problematic) place within it. For now, suffice it to accept his own definition of ideology as referring to “all human knowledge about efficacy (or effectiveness), particularly as it pertains to the achievement of values/satisfactions” (27). Included are “all systems of means, be they natural or artificial, that are used to obtain some end or goal” (16).

*Faith*, then, structures existence in a meaningful way; it is a person’s reliance on other peoples’ testimonies, beyond her or his own experience, as to what is satisfying, in order to “articulate his or her realm of values” (25). *Ideology* is the practical means one chooses to effect one’s values (ultimately one’s absolute value) in a given historical context. It is clear that faith and ideology require one another, a fact Segundo emphasizes repeatedly. They are twin dimensions of human ethics, and to ignore one or the other has serious consequences (which I will later explore further).

In one’s adult life, says Segundo, one’s faith “becomes less fluid and more established”; and as it “tends to ‘structure’ a person’s whole existence more than was the case when that person had all roads open to him or her, the person devotes less and less attention to that faith and

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5Hewitt, however, notes a certain confusion in Segundo’s writing in distinguishing faith and ideologies: “For the most part, he maintains a distinction which he characterizes as ‘radical’ and ‘fundamental’ between the two, since faith is the underpinning of values, while ideology is the means whereby these values are carried out in human praxis. However, there are times when Segundo makes statements like ideology is a ‘logical system of interconnected values,’ which includes both the values, or meaning-structure that orients a human life, along with the means whereby those values are realized in concrete historical experience” (1990, 47). Despite this confusion, Hewitt adds, Segundo is consistent in characterising the relationship of faith, values, and ideology in terms of a “dialectical interaction and interpretation” (48). Understanding the dialectical nature of the relationship is crucial to keeping Segundo’s notions coherent. This is particularly true regarding the interplay of ‘secondary’ values and ideology in the attempt to realize one’s ultimate or absolute value.
more to the problems bound up with methods” (1984, 13). It is very difficult for adults to change their faith; they become, as we might say, ‘set in their values.’ Further, as we advance in our adult lives, we begin to see things according to our faith: “Faith, in other words, is not simply the way in which we endow our perception with some value; it is also a cognitive principle which enables us to see certain things rather than other equally obvious things” (14). In other words, we could say, this constitutes our bias.

This affects how we understand the ideological realm. Though this realm is in principle objective and nonvaluational, it is distorted by how we see the objective or ‘natural’ circumstances. Ultimately, ideology is determined by faith:

In principle ideology, as I define it here, does not determine the meaning-structure or the values-structure of a human life; it is the other way around . . . In other words, a value is never chosen as the dominant one simply because it is realizable. On the contrary, human beings will seek out methods that are effective in terms of the values they appreciate most . . . Experience shows us that no one can reasonably claim to have replaced faith with ideology in seeking to determine the basic values of his or her life. For such values will always depend on the referential witnesses to satisfactions, on people in whom one believes. (28)

The basic premise is straightforward: faith is primary in an individual’s ethic. Segundo notes that it is possible for people (mostly unwittingly) to change their ideals, perhaps because they are unrealizable. This involves changing faith, the referential witnesses in whom one believes; but faith still dictates ideology, rather than vice-versa. This has implications for environmentalism, in that it leaves open the possibility that people can substitute in ‘green’ values at or near the top of their scales, and correspondingly change their faith, and the referential witnesses in whom they trust. One does not, for example, choose to limit one’s consumption and ecological footprint

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6 As alluded to earlier, I will later have cause to more closely examine this claim in light of Ellul’s critique of technological society in particular.
simply because it’s easier (though it may be, in some cases); one chooses to alter one’s lifestyle based on a restructuring of value-priorities, where conservation and limit rank higher than consumption and (perhaps) convenience.

*Values*, then, especially the absolute value, are of primary importance in the formulation of an individual’s ethic (i.e., what he or she believes, and how he or she acts in accordance to those beliefs, in order realize and gain satisfaction from them). The term ‘value’ ought to give us pause, if only to be clear about what it signifies. Segundo explicitly addresses the difficulty with using the term ‘value,’ particularly in attempting to provide what end up as tautological definitions. The term ‘value,’ he says, is a meaningful one; we understand what it means when something is ‘worth the trouble’ (17). Despite the simple truth of this, it is equally obvious that the term is abstract. It is particularly difficult, says Segundo, when we try to name values: “Here an illuminating paradox might be introduced: It is virtually impossible for any human being to express, in conceptual terms, the value to which he or she has subordinated every other aspect of his or her life – presuming the options taken have been logical” (17). He also points out later on in *Faith and Ideologies* that a ‘value’ is not categorized by truth or falsity: “In itself a value is not true or false. It is a way of perceiving and evaluating reality, independent of the facticity of the latter” (109).

Segundo notes that the term ‘value’ abstracts from “real life” in three different ways. First, “we talk about ‘value’ without noticing that our motivations do not relate to things but to persons in the concrete” (17). The second abstraction is that “even when we primarily focus on persons rather than on things, the plurality of values does not correspond to any concrete reality . . . While choosing and the plurality of ‘chooseable’ objects may go hand in hand, the plurality itself is framed within the context of a larger fundamental unity, which of course is very complex”
We will have cause to re-visit the notion of ‘values’ later. (17-18).

These two abstractions are not altogether clear, and somewhat debatable, but it is the third that is of most interest:

The third abstraction lies in the fact that we leave aside the role of imagination in these various forms by which our energy is stabilized. We do not concretely choose between values, but between imagined representations of possible satisfactions. We do not opt for the “virtue” or the “value” of peace; we opt for our imagined picture of the satisfaction we would get from knowing that those we loved dearly were living in a situation of peace or greater peace. And then we put an abstract name on this prospective piece of imagining. It is the role of imagination which logically explains why a human being often operates in a very complicated way with what we might call a scale of values. Human beings will not implement the same “values” in dealing with different types of people, for example. Yet they will be consistent with the concrete image and ideal that their imagination fashioned, while still regarding different people in different ways. (18)

This is a very important point to bear in mind when speaking of ‘values,’ which is necessary in any analysis of modern ethics. As the passage from Segundo’s work demonstrates, there is an implied freedom of individual choice when speaking of values, a distinctly modern characteristic (as will be seen in the next chapter). Inevitably, however, a ‘value’ represents something that we aim to realize and see realized concretely, to our satisfaction, which is meaningful to us in an enduring way.  

Religious faith

As we have seen, Segundo differentiates clearly between faith and religion. He points out that people with very different values can practise the same religion, in which they each “seek supernatural means that will effectively realize their different values” (54). One can imagine countless examples; compare, for instance, a Christian who believes that the only purpose of

7We will have cause to re-visit the notion of ‘values’ later.
mortal life on this earth is to prepare for and ensure eternal salvation in the afterlife (thus
rendering environmental issues mostly irrelevant), and one who understands his/her spirituality as
intimately bound to the earth as God’s body, which is to be revered and treasured. Segundo
elaborates on religion as *means*:

People usually choose between different religions more for reasons of efficacy than
because of different values-structures. In the last analysis people who are called
“religious,” or who call themselves “religious,” generally see religion primarily as a
set of *means*. For them it lies on the plane of *efficacy*. And usually it is some sort
of magical efficacy that came before scientific efficacy in the course of human
evolution. That is why I think it is wrong to identify religion with anthropological
faith. For, as I have defined the latter term, it specifies the realm of values and
their proper hierarchy, not the realm of means and efficacy. (54)

It is an “undeniable fact” for Segundo that religion, in its formal sense (and common definition),
belongs to the realm of ideology: “. . . religion frequently designates a merely instrumental realm
which is manipulated by values prior to, and independent of, religion itself” (60). The negative
connotations of this are clear. He is largely critical of religion as a social institution, referring
particularly to Jesus’ polemic against the religious structure of his time and its inherent
instrumentality. Segundo, following Jesus’ example, is reacting against the emptiness of
‘religious’ practice, which has presented itself as the divine word when merely representing the
chosen historical means of realizing certain values. Using his own terms of reference, Segundo
understands this as *faithless ideology*; hollow instrumentality given a divine character. Religious
‘fanaticism’ might be considered an extreme example of this; I will later look at how the modern
technocratic ethos reflects a similar tendency.

Recalling that the ‘absolute value’ that is inherently part of anthropological faith does not
I am aware, naturally, that what we consider ‘religion’ is not exclusively bound to a conception of God; given that Segundo was himself a Christian priest, however, and worked within that framework, I will for the time being restrict myself to the language of monotheism. In fact, any notion of a divine power could be substituted for the particular point being made.

Segundo states that there are two possibilities of relating faith to God: “(1) a faith is related to God when it abandons human witnesses to entrust the question of values to a divine revelation; or (2) a faith is related to God when it looks at a particular series of human witnesses and sees a certain quality which it attributes to God, whether logically or not” (64-65). Within his own framework, Segundo asserts, only the second possibility makes sense, since meaning-structure always depends on human witnesses. He dismisses the possibility of truly rejecting human witnesses to “entrust the question of values to divine revelation,” despite common theological injunctions to do so, since all revelation by God “must be perceived and transmitted through testimony” (64). Our values, our faith, is prior to belief in the existence of God: “The supposition that we first accept God and then ask God what values we are to cultivate is nothing but an absurd cliché” (65-66).

Rather than beginning with the presence of the Divine as definitional, Segundo again offers an anthropological explanation for what he considers to be religious faith. He identifies two elements as constitutive of religious faith: “(1) the transmission of transcendent data which are decisive for the realm of values; and (2) adherence to a tradition of referential witnesses regarding the experiencing and acquisition of those data” (81).

The first element, the presence of transcendent data, in and of itself doesn’t mark faith as distinctively religious. Segundo admits that this presence of transcendent data “is only one of the elements of religious faiths. By itself it would not suffice to qualify a faith as religious” (82). As

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noted earlier, all anthropological faith must be based, ultimately, on a transcendent datum (or transcendent data); something which transcends our inherently limited experience of what ultimately leads to satisfaction. This causes us to rely on referential witnesses. Segundo, at this point in his analysis, takes it a step further. *Pre-existing* human values, i.e., a person’s faith, are always present. It is possible for someone (Segundo gives the example of Jesus) not only to appeal to these pre-existing values, but call for “‘conversion’ – which is to say, a modification of one’s values-structure” on the basis of such values (81). This ‘conversion,’ in turn, requires transcendent data. He explains:

Relying on existential analysis, we find that a certain values-structure is open to being converted into a higher one along the same lines, provided that certain data are acquired. These data transcend any possible human experience (e.g., the victory of love over death, radical equality of possibilities for all human beings, and so forth). So “conversion” (i.e., discontinuity) does not negate the basic identity with already existing values (i.e., continuity). The new values-structure does not replace or annul the earlier one. (81-82)

Again, Segundo stresses that this alone does not make a faith religious; importantly, “many transcendent data are to be found in expressions of value quite at variance with religious ones,” such as, for example, Marxism (82). This again can be linked to secular environmentalism, even where individuals see their values to be “quite at variance with religious ones.”

The second constitutive element of Segundo’s idea of religious faith is a “tradition of witnesses.” Lest this be confused with what he has already stated about referential witnesses, which again are part of all anthropological faiths, he specifies a ‘second tier’ (my term) group of witnesses: people who have “learned how to learn.” As a person’s faith evolves, as he or she grows, it becomes clear that there is no ready-made answer to all the different problems faced in living out one’s values. The individual learns that “a given attitude towards some value never
constitutes the best solution once and for all vis-à-vis the problem at hand” (75). Thus, according to Segundo, we eventually put faith in those people who have clearly learned best how to adapt to ever-changing reality while holding true to their values-structure (similar to our own): “We put our human ‘faith’ in people who have managed to maintain certain values, ones basically similar to ours, by learning how to achieve them despite change, uncertainty, and failure” (75). Obviously no one individual can adapt ceaselessly through time to all changes; every person is bound by his or her historical context, including as prominent a figure as Jesus. Thus, there develops a tradition of witnesses who have learned how to learn, a tradition with which each in the series of witnesses identifies him- or herself. Again, Segundo relates this specifically to the example of Jesus:

In reality Jesus identified himself with a “tradition,” a specific history. It entailed a long series of referential witnesses to certain values, a process involving defeats, victories, and retreats. Jesus made clear his continuity with a group of human beings who were deeply united in their anthropological “faith” and who found support in each other for the task of learning how to learn. (75-76)

Segundo notes that a tradition is different from a school of thought, in which the determining factor is the logic of the new arguments (76). In a tradition, the emphasis is on people and their experiences. When people enter into a tradition, “they find themselves retracing the experiences of other people that have been explored by a community and given suitable symbolization” (82).

The place of transcendent data, then, combined with a tradition, “transforms anthropological faith into authentic religious faith” (76). Segundo elaborates:

The latter is a faith which defines values, not because those values are suddenly revealed to human beings who have been without them up to that point, but because this faith constitutes a system of learning-apprenticeship transmitted by historical witnesses which enables people to recognize and discern genuine transcendent data; and those data, in turn, become defining factors of people’s
At the very least, Segundo’s explanation leaves open the possibility that religious faith may in fact end up having very little to do with what we would normally call ‘religion.’ By simultaneously placing conceptions of traditional religion squarely in the realm of ideology, and defining religious faith in a way that only scarcely differs from anthropological faith that is inherent to all humans, Segundo widens the arena for human meaningfulness, and blurs the distinction between being religious and being ethical. This is a point I will expand upon as I move forward with my analysis; in particular, the idea that ‘secular’ environmentalists can be moved or obligated by a sense of commitment to ‘transcendent’ notions of the good, divorced though they may be from specific belief in traditional accounts of the supernatural.

What is implicit (and at times explicit) in Segundo’s analysis is the strength he sees in the form of religious faith (as he defines it), regardless of what kind. In the face of shifting historical contexts, having to constantly ‘start from scratch’ in terms of adopting values-systems leaves people confused and vulnerable to bad faith, and faithless ideologies; having a tradition to identify with, one that does not impose a specific ideology (in Segundo’s sense) but takes its ideological cue from historical/social reality (what Segundo calls “signs of the times”) provides people with solidarity and a more secure moral and social foundation. ‘Good faith’ – particularly religious faith – teaches people to learn how to learn, “how to create ideologies or accept ideologies

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9Segundo’s explanation of what constitutes specifically religious faith, over and beyond regular faith, seems somewhat stretched. One wonders why, in the above passage, Segundo applies the modifier “genuine” to the transcendent data relating to religious faith. Michael Hoy offers a critique of the thin distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘regular’ faith: “Anthropological” faith is primary because it already contains a ‘transcendent datum’ that makes it worthwhile. ‘Religious’ faith only adds to the ‘transcendent data’ and fosters a ‘tradition’ of referential witnesses. But both of these elements are already technically present in ‘anthropological’ faith. Thus, ‘faith’ develops or evolves along a number of ‘stages,’ but it is still the same ‘faith.’ Any real distinction between ‘anthropological’ faith and ‘religious’ faith dissolves into the continuity of their relationship” (1995, 166-167).
created by others insofar as they forced values ‘to come to terms with’ historical reality (1984, 130). This idea is extremely important to my own exploration, which is the reason for my outlining in detail Segundo’s theory; can environmentalism be a good faith?

Environmental ethics

I come now, finally, to a more specific examination of the possible implications of Segundo’s theory for environmental ethics. This is necessarily interpretive, since Segundo himself said very little about environmentalism, focusing exclusively on the emancipation of human beings in Latin America. Liberation theology, at heart, concerns foremost the welfare of humans, specifically the poor and oppressed.\(^\text{10}\) Frances Stefano notes that there is an “astonishing lack of attention by many political and liberationist theologians to the subject of ecology” (1992, xiii). Segundo does make some reference to ecological issues, specifically in *Faith and Ideologies*, but they are secondary to the liberation of humans. Again, Stefano comments that

> it must be admitted . . . that Segundo’s interest in ecology remains centered on the application of ecological wisdom and flexibility to the spheres of politics and society in a way almost exclusively concerned with the interests of human liberation . . . While he does not rule out explicitly ecological concerns but constructs an evolutionary ontology capable of supporting them, he does not address ecological issues as such. (xxv-xxvi n.27)

Segundo mentions environmental/natural restrictions as part of the ideological reality that we must conform to in our efforts to realize our values. Contemporary environmental issues, he would no doubt say, are part of the “signs of the times,” of evolving historical context. It is not

\(^{10}\)Many environmental philosophers, though, argue that the oppression and domination of human and nature are inextricably linked, most notably social (and socialist) ecologists and ecofeminists. Stephen Scharper, for example, explicitly links Thomas Berry’s notion of ‘new cosmology’ and liberation theology in a recent (2006) article in *Environmental Philosophy*.  

Segundo’s concern to examine how dominant values-structures in Western society have engendered environmental problems and a fractured relationship between humans and non-human nature generally; this work, though not using his conceptions of faith and ideology, has been done by many contemporary environmental philosophers.

I agree with Stefano’s statement that Segundo’s ontology is capable of supporting ecological concerns, though Segundo himself does not demonstrate it specifically; further, I believe Segundo’s explanation of the fundamental relationship of human meaning and action can help illumine the nature of environmental ethics. His analysis uncovers the basis of how people live their ‘philosophies,’ the dimensions of human value and belief and their manifestations in practice; in other words, ethics. What, then, makes an environmental ethic, or makes an individual or group environmentally ethical?

In their popular usage, the terms ‘ideology’ and ‘faith’ are not of much use. For example, if we speak of a group’s ‘eco-ideology,’ it is unclear exactly we referring to. Does it involve the spiritual, or is that reserved to each person’s individual ‘faith’? What if one’s core ideological values are based on faith? And of course ‘faith,’ in its common usage, often implies non-rational, specific conviction and unquestioning trust in something most likely (conventionally) unprovable; this is unlikely to be a description embraced by environmentalists about their attitudes. The unhelpful confusion of the kind arising here is one of the primary reasons Segundo undertakes to reconstitute the terms in question, as mentioned earlier. What happens when we look at environmental ethics using his concepts?

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11 As mentioned briefly in the Introduction, I take this to mean something broader than morality, if the latter is defined more strictly as concern with and understandings/theories of distinctions between right/wrong, ought/ought not – though this is certainly part of ethics.
Faith, as we have seen, involves choosing a value-structure, including an absolute, unconditioned value that defines the goal or path of one’s life. It is faith because we have no way of ‘fast-forwarding’ to the end point of our life to see if it brought us meaning and satisfaction, and thus we must rely on the experiences and lessons of others. Presumably, the environmental activist/ethicist includes in her or his scale of values respect for the natural world/environment.

The environmentalist, perhaps in response to an experience in nature, or perhaps in response to the visible consequences of ecological degradation, chooses a ‘green’ scale of values, articulated and understood on the basis of referential witnesses. In point of fact, it is more accurate to say that as an individual forms her or his meaning- or values-structure, thus forming her or his ‘character,’ her or his scale of values may be gradually understood to correspond with what is generally categorized as ‘environmental’; although the social data are passed on unconsciously and consciously by referential witnesses, labels and identity come second, though they persist with more ‘common’ groupings of individuals sharing similar values-structures. Segundo speaks to this point:

> Despite the enormous diversity of the panorama [of faith and ideologies] so afforded us, there are certain vital structures which seem to be repeated to some extent in each epoch. The fact that these structures are given names helps to ensure this, or is a result of this. “Christianity,” “liberalism,” “Marxism,” “materialism,” and “scientism” are examples of what I am talking about here. (1984, 19-20)

If we speak of generations rather than epochs, we might now be able to add the name ‘environmentalism.’ However, Segundo adds that such labels end up creating confusion, as they are neatly but inaccurately categorized as ‘religions’ or ‘ideologies’ (I will return to this point at the close of the chapter).
An environmental scale of values functions like any faith, which, as we have seen, “serves as a mechanism which enables people to classify happenings and events, in a largely unconscious but nevertheless effective way, in accordance with the values they have accepted and hierarchized. It saves energy for us since we do not start off every line of deliberation from scratch, and often do not deliberate at all” (25). Segundo notes that despite the readiness with which we can analyse the structure of faith as a dimension of human existence, again, we have difficulty articulating our own meaning-structures, as we saw earlier when looking at what constitutes ‘values’:

> We human beings have all the trouble in the world trying to express in a precise conceptual way what we believe in. (I say “believe” in because the data-items transcend our direct experience yet give direction to our lives.) It is very difficult to formulate, except perhaps in symbolic terms, something that functions as a structure in unconscious, almost mechanical terms. That may well be one of the reasons why human beings reflect so little on it . . . Even the word “value” used here is a convenient abstraction for something that is much more concrete, complex, and personalized. (25-26)

It is clear that despite the difficulty in expressing what we believe in, we can act on it and it can be perceived by others. This actually helps define a particular community or group, such as environmentalists.

A significant question that arises here, and in fact from the earliest examination of Segundo’s notion of faith, is whether all data-items transcend our direct experience, and specifically the absolute value to which all others are subordinated. I raise this issue here, in discussing environmental ethics, because some environmentalists would argue strongly that at least part (perhaps the absolute part) of their values-structure is derived from their own unique, direct experiences in nature. Segundo would disagree; for him, faith must be transmitted through referential witnesses. I will return to this idea later, however.
Suffice it to say that there exists what one might call, in Segundo’s terminology, ‘green faith.’ What, then, of ideology? Ideology, as we have noted, is the realm of efficacy or methodology. It is secondary to, and determined by, faith. In the case of the environmentalist, ideology would then be the realm of activism, the methods used in order to most fully live by his or her values and realize his or her absolute value. Ideologies can naturally differ; people have different ideas on how to most effectively implement, realize and live by their values, even if the values they share are the same. It is not surprising, then, that there are a wide variety of environmental groups, with different emphases in their activism.

It is easy enough, then, to begin to understand environmentalism in Segundo’s frame of reference. What is more challenging is understanding how the earth itself, or nature, fits into Segundo’s framework, as well as the behaviour of the human species towards our natural environment in the last century in particular. Interestingly, Segundo briefly engages with the thought of economist and environmental thinker E. F. Schumacher, particularly as presented in his famous book *Small is Beautiful*. Though he is sympathetic to Schumacher’s critique of humans’ abuse of natural resources and attitudes towards the planet generally, Segundo cannot quite agree with his designation of the land or the earth as an end-in-itself. The land, fundamental as it is to our survival and well-being, remains inescapably part of that objective nature to which we relate in the realm of ideology. The earth is a means to our ends:

While one may disagree with the terminology used by Schumacher, the point of his warning is clear enough: once we persuade ourselves that things are means, and nothing more than means, we begin to manipulate them in such a way that we end up destroying them. And we end up destroying even the most essential means, the ones which are means needed for any end. On the terminological level I am not satisfied with Schumacher’s notion that the land or earth is an “end-in-itself.” But his basic point is clear enough: the earth is a means so vital to all human ends that
we must be extremely cautious about its rational use. (259)

From this passage it remains somewhat unclear as to exactly how far Segundo concurs with Schumacher’s assessment. The key seems to be the point that we persuade ourselves that things (in this case, the earth) are “nothing more than means,” since it is then that we end up destroying them. This is bad on a purely practical level, since the earth is clearly an “essential” means, since we require it “for any end”; it is difficult to see, nonetheless, how for Segundo the earth would something more than means.

He provides a partial answer, at least, shortly after the above passage. The problem of means, he says, relates to scale; we no longer know what ends we are serving. Environmentally speaking, we cannot properly understand just how much we are destroying our final ends (in which we have faith) through rampant (mis)use of environmental resources.\(^\text{12}\) Given the current dimensions of industrial production\(^\text{13}\), says Segundo,

humanity was confronted with an ever-growing ethical crisis . . . This crisis did not stem from using the principle that the end justifies the means. It stemmed instead from the fact that the scale of means employed made it impossible for us to decide exactly what ends they were really serving. The ability to compare the means with the end, and hence to decide whether they were in harmony or not, has somehow been slipping through our fingers. (260)\(^\text{14}\)

Relating this point to the earlier one, our treatment of the earth as means has grown out of proportion with the ends we were hoping to serve, to the point where we no longer have a clear idea what those ends are. Our behaviour is thus dictated by means alone, to the destruction of

\(^\text{12}\) Again, Segundo himself does not explicitly comment on environmentalism.

\(^\text{13}\) These dimensions, of course, have grown exponentially in the over twenty years since he wrote Faith and Ideologies.

\(^\text{14}\) Again, I believe Segundo’s assessment of the influence of means to be incomplete, in light of the reality of technological society that defines the modern West; again, I will take this up in subsequent chapters.
the natural environment. This crucial point will take on an added dimension when we look at the nature of technological society.

For the moment I will leave aside the assessment of environmental problems, and the environment *per se*, vis-à-vis Segundo's framework. I wish to return to understanding the basic nature of environmental ethics in Segundo's terms. Specifically, how does *religious faith* fit in?

We have already seen how the line between 'regular' anthropological faith and religious faith is thin. All faiths, by Segundo's criteria, involve transcendent data. Segundo emphasizes as much himself, particularly in arguing against 'philosophies' or 'ideologies' (in the more commonly accepted sense) that claim to be strictly secular or materialist. He points to Marxism in particular.

He quotes the following passage from Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as an example:

> Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.

(Cited in Segundo 1970, 21)

Segundo points out that Marx's conclusion here "lies beyond any possibility of verification," and therefore constitutes a transcendent datum (1984, 140). This datum, he further notes, is not peripheral to the "'scientific' planning of society that Marx is working out": "It plays a central role in forming and arranging Marx's hierarchy of values as well as the criteria to be used in judging their realization in history" (141).

The point here is not to put forward the argument that Marxism is a religion, but that ethically it draws on the same impulse and reflects the same anthropological dimension as religious faith; thus the line between 'religious faith' and 'secular ideology' becomes highly
arbitrary. Referring again to the example, Segundo clearly speaks to this point:

That this “transcendent datum” is not “religious” is obvious, unless we want to indulge in word-play. What is far from obvious, on the other hand, is that this datum is qualitatively different from one that is religious, insofar as materialist criticism is concerned. Indeed, it would not be difficult to trace the “spiritual” trajectory which led Marx, and the ideological panorama of the nineteenth century, to place such confidence in the destiny of humanity. (141)

Another fact Segundo alludes to here is that many ‘secular’ or ‘materialist’ systems of beliefs deliberately distance themselves from ‘supernatural’ elements and any form of the transcendent, particularly the religious. The example from Marx’s work shows that this is often illusory, and that transcendent data find their way into even the most diehard materialist faiths; nonetheless, there is frequently an effort to validate a system of beliefs or methodology by defining it as purged of ‘superstitious trappings’ in favour of ‘objective truth’ (a notion which itself has been thrown into question over the last few decades under relentless postmodern critique).

Returning to the context of environmentalism, like any other ‘ism’ there is the presence of transcendent data; data that constitute the objects of faith, yet lie beyond experiential or empirical verification. Without indulging in the “word-play” Segundo refers to, we may nonetheless notice the wavering line, at least at the level of human meaningfulness and action, between those who are ‘religious’ and those who are not. As with the example of Marxism, the point is not that environmentalists are all religious, or that environmentalism as a whole constitutes a religion, but to get beyond such labels and understand the reality of what it is to have an environmental ethic. Religious faith is an extension of ‘regular’ anthropological faith, itself a universal human dimension; and if we are to believe what Segundo implies, an important one. If environmental
ethics parallel this extension, it is important to note. While Segundo would no doubt wish to keep some separation between classically understood religious traditions and secular social movements, he allows for the possibility of such movements to have characteristics of religious faith: “Some values-systems, which claim to be lay or secular, have been infiltrated by elements proper to religious faith, whether their proponents realize it or not” (83).

We must remember, though, that Segundo clearly posits a second required element for religious faith: a tradition of witnesses. Unlike many religious traditions, Western environmentalism does not have hundreds or thousands of years of heritage.15 There is some indication, however, of a growing tradition of referential witnesses, people who inspire environmentalists and in whom we can have faith as exemplars of those who learned how to learn, how to face the complexities of living their values in their own contexts. The Sierra Club, for example, particularly in the U.S. organization, places great emphasis on its founding father, John Muir. Environmentalist publications are full of ‘human interest’ stories; examples of real people balancing and understanding their own sense of meaning and value in their specific context. Although she has not been widely embraced by the environmentalist community at large, Annie Dillard, writer, poet and mystic and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, is perhaps a good example of a potential referential witness of environmental ethics. Through her meditations and writings on her own observation of and participation in nature, including the many mystical/spiritual experiences she has, Dillard effectively teaches readers how to be good learners, good ‘adaptors’ to ever-changing complexities in living out one’s

15 This may in part explain why so many environmentalists turn to existing religious traditions such as Buddhism or Native spirituality to ‘bolster’ their own sense of ethics; perhaps this is the how the void will be filled.
environmental values. Likewise, several participants mentioned David Suzuki. Such a status, one might argue, is one into which Al Gore is growing.\(^{16}\)

I must be careful here to point out that for all the parallels between environmentalism and Segundo’s notion of religious faith, environmental ethics hardly stand as unique on this ground. We have already seen how Segundo focuses on Marxism; he notes in particular that Marxism and Christianity, far from being diametrically opposed, in fact have the same basic structure of both faith and ideology. I would suggest – and will elaborate on later – that environmentalism by and large has a healthy and acknowledged balance between faith and ideology, values and actions, and that this is particularly crucial in technological society. However, there remains the very serious problem of the lack of an *objective standard of good*. Nazism, after all, could in Segundo’s framework have an equally healthy balance of faith and ideology, and enough of a tradition to qualify as religious faith, with the ethical and cultural strength that entails. Or, perhaps more pertinent at the moment, forms of religious zealotry or fundamentalism also have strong values-structures and clear ideologies to realize them. Marsha Hewitt notes the implications of this for Segundo’s liberationist platform in an important footnote commenting on his idea of faith:

> An unnerving implication of this concept of faith is its potential for literalism and fundamentalism that could easily serve goals and values that are directly opposed to human liberation. This is a danger that Segundo never addresses, neither does he even raise its possibility. Segundo obviously relies on ideology – the correct ideology – to preclude any such danger. It might then be argued that Segundo places too much weight on ideology and its power to move human beings in the direction of liberation. If this argument is valid, then the relationship between faith and ideology loses its dialectical character. (1990, 62 n.22)

This key point cannot be overlooked. Like other crucial points I have raised in this early

\(^{16}\)These are but a few examples; countless others could be given (Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Thomas Berry, etc.).
part of my work, it is something I will elaborate on as my project unfolds; the role of an outside standard of ‘good’ in environmental ethics (and ethics generally). In Segundo’s theory this role is not, as we have seen, filled by the universally absolute or unconditioned. Despite his insistence on the presence of an absolute value in faith, it is absolute only for the individual. The absolute and the relative are bound together in Segundo’s notion of faith. Hewitt elaborates on this point:

For him, anthropological faith is both, and at the same time, absolute and relative, transcendent and immanent. Values may be relative in the sense that any given value or meaning-structure may inform one person’s life, but are [sic] rejected by another. The absolute nature of values lies in the absoluteness of that value for a particular individual, which is consecrated or “crowned” as the central value of one’s life. The relativity of the absolute value means that no given value can be understood as unconditional, or absolute in itself. (53)

This is a strangely secularist position for a theologian to take, but one that follows logically from Segundo’s analysis of anthropological faith. Hewitt sees this as inherent to liberation theology generally, which “must, and indeed does to some extent, embrace secular thought and discourse in order to construct an adequate analysis of reality which is the first step towards concrete change” (3). Speaking of Segundo in particular, she agrees with Dennis McCann’s observation that he is “more of a social theorist’ than a theologian” (5). One can debate the specific labels, but what is certain is that he explicitly builds his theory ‘bottom up’ from historical context. Whether or not his theology is the “negation” of theology, as Hewitt claims, there is no doubt that it is developed in response to the urgent social realities around him. As Stefano observes, “he moves from the need for action in the face of such problems toward an interpretation of Jesus’ news of God’s kingdom which makes use of a liberative logic internal to action itself” (1992, xi). In his article “Revelation, Faith, Signs of the Times” (1993), Segundo suggests that rather than moving from revelation, to (conventional religious) faith, to “signs of the
times” (i.e., historical context), a more instructive “anthropological” order would be the reverse (129). He explains in his conclusion:

It is the signs of the times, read with an open, sensitive heart, that prevent the “letter” by which the whole of revelation is bound to human language from becoming lethal (2 Cor. 3:6) – even the letter of the gospel – and lead us astray instead of leading us to an encounter with the heart of God. These signs show us a path that, in being shared, fashions a people, and history. They are as indications of the fact that history has meaning, and that it is reasonable to wager on that meaning. And from the wealth of this liberative experience, shared in community, springs a reasonable faith, not a fideism or a magical instrument. When that faith, become tradition, leads us to the truth that humanizes our sisters and brothers, and commits us definitively, then we know that God is present in it, guiding us – revealing to us the truth of the human being that should be. (147-148)

Here again we see the movement from ‘regular’ anthropological faith to what constitutes religious faith. And again, we can see how this is relevant to environmental ethics. There is no question that environmentalism is a movement formed in response to historical context, specifically the despoliation of nonhuman nature on an unprecedented scale. If, for the sake of inclusiveness, we remove specific reference to God and revelation, the above passage could easily apply to the environmental movement, and thereby suggest a healthy form of individual and communal ethics (i.e., value-formation and action and the basis of values). Strong ethics need not be exclusively fostered in a traditional religious community. What Segundo calls “cultural traditions” (which can, but need not, be traditionally religious) are extremely important for faith, because we choose referential witnesses from our cultural milieu: “[Human nature] not only proposes but to a large extent imposes meaning-systems. It not only proposes witnesses but chooses them within a certain framework of coherent meaningfulness. The human being chooses, but within channels which have been traced out for it to a large extent. We call those channels ‘cultural traditions’” (1984, 314). Strong cultural traditions, presumably, will precipitate the
movement in individuals from ‘regular’ anthropological faith to ‘religious’ faith, which as we have
seen need not be strictly limited to traditional religious communities.

It is important to note that there is more entailed here than in environmental *philosophies.*
Contemporary environmental philosophies may have some influence over environmental activists,
but it is probably fairer to say that they *reflect* the currents of the environmental movement rather
than direct them. An environmental philosophy, like any philosophy, understood in Segundo’s
framework, involves constant re-examination of premises and critical thought; as Segundo puts it,
‘starting from scratch’ with each generation, and in fact each individual. What makes a *tradition,*
by contrast, is the fact that certain ‘building blocks’ of meaning are passed on to work from. Says
Segundo, “since philosophy seeks to exercise rational control from start to finish, it denies itself
the means of transmission which a cultural tradition has” (325).

A cultural tradition, formed by and exerting influence over individuals and communities
whose ethics are defined by the interplay of faith and ideology, provides the ideal framework for
positive social change; and perhaps, ultimately, environmentalism has the potential to be such,
beyond just a tradition of referential witnesses. A cultural tradition is also, as we will see, an
important counterbalance within technological society. Segundo’s notion of the cultural tradition
stems from the conventional understanding/definition of an *ideology,* which he is attempting to
‘liberate’ from Marx’s harsh denouncement (though, obviously, he changes the terminology).
Ideology, Segundo assumes, can serve a function other than the legitimation of domination, as per
Marx’s definition. To him, as Hewitt writes, it can be a “progressive, necessary and even
emancipatory social force”: “This view emphasizes the socially functional purpose of ideology,
because it assumes that human beings need schematic codes of interpretation whereby to
understand their own particular world, and meaning and place in that world” (1990, 47). I am in agreement (as is Hewitt) with this assessment, though I will adhere to Segundo’s terminology to avoid confusion. Whereas ‘ideology’ as Marx defines it reinforces the domination of the ruling class, a strong and transparent cultural tradition has the potential to engender social and individual betterment.

*   *   *

Segundo’s analysis of the twin dimensions of human ethics, faith and ideology, provides a helpful framework in understanding the basic construction of meaning- and values-structure; one that can be fruitfully applied to environmentalism, as I have shown. The reliance on transcendent data in faith will be of particular relevance when examining notions of a ‘higher’ good at work in environmental ethics. As Segundo argues, we have freedom in choosing and implementing values in specific ways, but not in our desire and need to have such a scale of values, including and absolute value, for which we have a consistent vision of realization. Further, the idea of ‘religious faith,’ or a cultural tradition, can be applied to secular movements such as environmentalism.

The notion of a tradition is expounded in a slightly different way by Alasdair MacIntyre, as part of his proposal for an alternative conception of morality in modernity. To put this into context, and to supplement Segundo’s phenomenological analysis, I turn next to an examination of dominant modes of moral theory and discourse (and their implications for environmental ethics), as illustrated and critiqued by MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. Parallel to Segundo’s idea of a scale of values to which we orient ideologies is Taylor’s notion of distinctions of worth and “strong evaluations.” It is to these ideas, and the broader analyses of MacIntyre and Taylor, that I turn in the next chapter.
Chapter 3
Creating a Picture of Modern Moral Horizons: MacIntyre and Taylor

I think that environmental values are something that are, and out there in some parts of society and should be out there in more parts of society, and that we could all agree on certain environmental values, certain basic environmental values, that I think are, would be universally applicable... And that they don’t just come from mine or people’s individual thought processes, that these are something similar to just, to universal human rights, that we consider there’s some things that human people are entitled to, and we hope that everyone - at least, I hope that everyone would share those concepts of universal human rights, and I consider this along the same lines.

-Matthew, SCC member

I have examined the creation of meaning- and efficacy-structures – the basics of being ethical – in modernity, using Segundo’s analysis of faith and ideologies; like everything else, however, the most predominant and influential intellectual theories of the nature of morality change, significantly so from the premodern to modern period. How, then, can we characterize modern moral philosophy? To continue the contextualization of environmental ethics, they need to be further situated philosophically. We must understand something of modern moral philosophy, including its roots, if we are to place environmental ethics within it. Having begun with a more social scientific and phenomenological approach, I will now come to a philosophical-analytical (though also, in some cases, phenomenological) analysis, and hope thereby to further the exploration of what it means to have an environmental ethic. For this exercise, I rely primarily on the analyses of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. I agree with both that crucial to understanding the picture of modern morality is understanding its historical context; rather than attempt my own such account, I will make use of theirs, looking at each in turn. I will lay out the relevant aspects of their theories in and of themselves before relating them explicitly to environmental ethics in the final part of the chapter.
MacIntyre’s analysis

MacIntyre’s main theoretical punch comes in his book *After Virtue* (1981). In it he puts forward a comprehensive analysis, and scathing critique, of modern moral philosophy. He expresses utter disillusion with modern morality in general. John Horton and Susan Mendus, in the introductory chapter to their edited volume *Alasdair MacIntyre: After Virtue and After* (1994), comment: “In *After Virtue* MacIntyre reveals himself as not merely critical of some facets of modernity, but as despairing of both modern morality and post-Enlightenment moral philosophy in their entirety; and in his account these failures are intimately connected” (2-3). The essence of the critique, according to Horton and Mendus, is that “the Enlightenment project which has dominated philosophy during the past three hundred years promised a conception of rationality independent of historical and social context, and independent of any specific understanding of man’s nature and purpose. But not only has that promise in fact been unfulfilled, the project is itself fundamentally flawed and the promise could never be fulfilled” (3).

MacIntyre is in fact saying more than this, and although unquestionably the tenor of the work is one of disapproval, this does not cloud the insight he offers into the condition of modern moral philosophy. His main contention is that the language of morality is in a state of “grave disorder”: “What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality” (1981, 2). Further, “we are in a condition which almost nobody recognizes and which perhaps nobody at all can recognize fully” (4); this is because we have difficulty stepping outside of our
language and understanding in order to fully comprehend our own perspective.

MacIntyre begins his analysis in *After Virtue* by noting that “the most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character . . . There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture” (6). Major ethical disagreements of the age thus demonstrate a certain moral incoherence, though as Horton and Mendus point out, we still treat the issues as though they could be rationally decided: “On the surface our language is the language of objectivity, rationality and truth; but the language deceives us because, in the modern world, the concepts which it employs have become so etiolated that they can no longer do any serious moral work, nor are they able to provide criteria by which to decide what, in a moral context, counts as rational” (1994, 5). MacIntyre provides examples of contemporary moral debates, and identifies the salient characteristics they share: conceptual incommensurability, the assumption of an impersonal reality or set of criteria to which each side can appeal, and the presence in the various positions of a wide and heterogeneous variety of moral sources/inheritances. He analyzes these characteristics in detail throughout the rest of the book by placing them in historical and philosophical context.

Linked to the “rationally interminable” nature of contemporary moral argument, according to MacIntyre, is the dominance of the philosophical theory of *emotivism*. “Emotivism,” he states, “is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character” (1981, 11). By this theory, “agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none” (12). That this is the predominant viewpoint
in the sciences in particular, both social and physical, there can be little doubt. Connecting this
theory to his characterization of modern moral argument, MacIntyre says: “What I have
suggested to be the case by and large about our own culture – that in moral argument the
apparent assertion of principles functions as a mask for expressions of personal preference – is
what emotivism takes to be universally the case” (18). Emotivism seeks to rationalize what is in
fact moral incoherence.

MacIntyre rejects the claims to universality of emotivism as a theory of meaning for
several key reasons, none the least of which being its empty circularity:

“Moral judgments express feelings or attitudes,” it is said. “What kind of feelings
or attitudes?” we ask, perhaps remarking that approval is of many kinds. It is in
answer to this question that every version of emotivism either remains silent or, by
identifying the relevant kind of approval as moral approval – that is, the type of
approval expressed by specifically moral judgment – becomes vacuously circular.

(12)

Charles Taylor, for different though related reasons, also rejects emotivism, as we shall see.

Emotivism as a dominant theory represents for MacIntyre the final stage of increasingly
flagging conceptions of morality. He outlines a “scheme of moral decline” along three distinct
stages:

. . . a first at which evaluative and more especially moral theory and practice
embody genuine objective and impersonal standards which provide rational
justification for particular policies, actions and judgments and which themselves in
turn are susceptible of rational justification; a second stage at which there are
unsuccessful attempts to maintain the objectivity and impersonality of moral
judgments, but during which the project of providing rational justifications both by
means of and for the standards continuously break down; and a third stage at
which theories of an emotivist kind secure wide implicit acceptance because of a
general implicit recognition in practice, though not in explicit theory, that claims to
objectivity and impersonality cannot be made good. (18)

At the very least, says MacIntyre, “to a large degree people now think, talk and act as if
emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture” (21).

The emotivist understanding of morality has significant consequences for how engagement in moral debate is framed and understood (and, ultimately in many instances, set aside), which I will return to later in the context of environmentalism. MacIntyre focuses on one in particular, identifying what he sees as the “key social content” of emotivism (something that emotivist philosophers themselves do not): “It is the fact that emotivism entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations” (22). Because there are no impersonal criteria, the point of moral discourse is to sway others to our point of view. As MacIntyre notes: “For evaluative utterance can in the end have no point or use but the expression of my own feelings or attitudes and the transformation of the feelings and attitudes of others . . . The sole reality of distinctively moral discourse is the attempt of one will to align the attitudes, feelings, preferences and choices of another with its own. Others are always means, never ends” (23). This is not necessarily explicit; however, the result is a self-directing emphasis on manipulation and control. The notion of seeking truth or wisdom for its own sake is alien to this mode of moral discourse.

One of the interesting ways that MacIntyre explains this obliteration of distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative modes of social relations is through his discussion of social “characters,” roles that define and reflect a particular culture. The Public School Headmaster, the Explorer, and the Engineer, for example, were characters that partially defined the culture of Victorian England (26). Characters, says MacIntyre, are key to identifying a culture’s understanding of morality, because they are “the masks worn by moral philosophies”: “They are,
so to speak, the moral representatives of their culture and they are so because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world” (27). In our culture, emotivism can be seen embodied in the characters of the Manager and the Therapist in particular. They are significant representatives of our predominant understanding of morality. About these characters, MacIntyre says the following:

The manager treats ends as given, as outside his scope; his concern is with technique, with effectiveness in transforming raw materials into final products, unskilled labour into skilled labour, investment into profits. The therapist also treats ends as given, as outside his scope; his concern also is with technique, with effectiveness in transfiguring neurotic symptoms into directed energy, maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones. Neither manager nor therapist, in their roles as manager and therapist, do or are able to engage in moral debate. They are seen by themselves, and by those who see them with the same eyes as their own, as uncontested figures, who purport to restrict themselves to the realms in which rational agreement is possible – that is, of course from their point of view to the realm of fact, the realm of means, the realm of measurable effectiveness. (29)

As we will see, this description of the primary characters of modern Western society connects directly with Ellul’s characterization of technological society. These are the masters of technique, and both represent control and manipulation of means. MacIntyre very clearly links them with emotivism, and thus with modern moral philosophy; again, suffused with a technique-oriented form of interaction. This relates in particular to the character of the Manager.

MacIntyre elaborates further along in After Virtue: “Managers themselves and most writers about management conceive of themselves as morally neutral characters whose skills enable them to devise the most efficient means of achieving whatever end is proposed. Whether a given manager is effective or not is in the dominant view a quite different question from that of the morality of the ends which his effectiveness serves or fails to serve” (71). ‘Effectiveness,’ however, is not a morally neutral concept (again, as we will see more clearly when looking at Ellul’s arguments). It
represents a mode of interaction that takes for granted a mechanistic understanding of the world, one in which things are valued for their ‘efficiency quotient,’ so that the good is increasingly measured as the best means. This results in a fundamentally different view of the environment, for instance, than that espoused by the majority of environmental activists. MacIntyre provides a crucial link between the dominant emotivist understanding of morality and the technique-oriented social characters (particularly that of the Manager), demonstrating how particularly challenging it is for environmentalists to engage in modern moral discourse. I will return to this in more detail in a later chapter.

I would like to briefly highlight one more point that MacIntyre makes with regard to management before moving along with his analysis of emotivism. He devotes a good deal of pages in After Virtue questioning and critiquing the idea of managerial ‘expertise,’ linking it to his broader discussion of the breakdown of morality in modernity. In particular, he notes that the concept of value-neutral ‘fact,’ so crucial to modern management generally, has (like all other concepts he discusses) a specific history, one tied to our modern mechanistic understanding of reality as well as our moral division between what ‘is’ and what ‘ought to be.’ MacIntyre explains:

The notion of ‘fact’ with respect to human beings is . . . transformed in the transition from the Aristotelian to the mechanistic view. On the former view human action, because it is to be explained teleologically, not only can, but must be, characterised with reference to the hierarchy of goods which provide the ends of human action. On the latter view, human action not only can, but must be, characterised without any reference to such goods. On the former view the facts about human action include the facts about what is valuable to human beings (and not just the facts about what they think to be valuable); on the latter view there are no facts about what is valuable. ‘Fact’ becomes value-free, ‘is’ becomes a stranger to ‘ought’ and explanation, as well as evaluation, changes its character as a result of this divorce between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’ (80-81)
Clearly this relates to more than what we would consider the sphere of managerial expertise. In fact it reflects a whole different epistemology, because what is considered ‘fact’ generally has exclusive claim to the label ‘true.’

Again, the importance of this in the context of environmentalism cannot be understated. Operating on vestiges of the older Aristotelian view, by virtue alone perhaps of being in opposition to the mechanistic view, environmentalists generally make an implicit link between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’ That there is life outside of humanity, that there is nature and there is an Earth that sustains life, necessarily leads to the ought of respecting and preserving it. Though I should stress that I do not claim this to be the view of all environmentalists, there is an implied teleology to human action in that we are habitants of the Earth and part of nature; part of human good is the good of the whole of nature, and so there is an implicit value-designation on the very fact of our presence on Earth. I would add that this kind of view is often (and often dismissively, in modernity) understood as religious or spiritual. I will come back to this in tying together themes in the final chapter.

Let me return to MacIntyre’s analysis of emotivism. As with all cultures, our emotivist one has a distinct understanding of the self. Carrying forward his analysis, MacIntyre notes that the “self as presented by emotivism . . . cannot be simply or unconditionally identified with any particular moral attitude or point of view (including that of those characters which socially embody emotivism) just because of the fact that its judgments are in the end criterionless” (30). He continues: “Everything may be criticised from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self’s choice of standpoint to adopt” (30). This, he says, is what many modern philosophers have seen as the essence of moral agency. The lack of rational criteria for evaluation
Though he does not speak of emotivism specifically, George Grant makes a similar argument in his 1959 work *Philosophy in the Mass Age*. In it, Grant identifies the key dilemma of modern morality: how to reintroduce an idea of *categorical limit*, which was inherent to natural law theories, to the modern “history-making spirit” which has replaced these theories. The freedom and sovereignty of the individual agent from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity” (30).

This ‘freedom’ is the hallmark of the modern moral agent, as numerous contemporary writers have identified (Taylor in particular, again as we shall see). The freedom of the modern, emotivist self comes from the denial of teleology. No longer is there a given end to human life which bestows purpose and identity. This is one of MacIntyre’s primary arguments, that “the emotivist self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end” (32).1

The emotivist self, says MacIntyre, exists alongside the social characters he defines in a somewhat paradoxical social order. He explains:

>[The self’s] definition is the counterpart to the definition of those *characters* which inhabit and present the dominant social roles. The bifurcation of the contemporary social world into a realm of the organisational in which ends are taken to be given and are not available for rational scrutiny and a realm of the personal in which judgment and debate about values are central factors, but in which no rational social resolution of issues is available, finds its internalisation, its inner representation, in the relation of the individual self to the roles and *characters* of social life. (1981, 32-33)

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1 Though he does not speak of emotivism specifically, George Grant makes a similar argument in his 1959 work *Philosophy in the Mass Age*. In it, Grant identifies the key dilemma of modern morality: how to reintroduce an idea of *categorical limit*, which was inherent to natural law theories, to the modern “history-making spirit” which has replaced these theories. The freedom and sovereignty of the individual agent from any natural, transcendent order – the replacement of the idea of *providence* by that of *progress* – carries with it a limitlessness of action that he finds disturbing. For Grant, it is a fundamentally *spiritual* as well as moral problem, crystallized in the question: “Can the achievements of the age of progress be placed at the service of a human fre doom that finds itself completed and not denied by a spiritual order?” (1995, 69). This, clearly, is a notion of *freedom* that is distinct from usually one exalted by and in the history-making, emotivist self (and one that Grant shares with Ellul). I will return to the notions of *limit* and *freedom* in drawing together theories and offering conclusions.
The apparent conflict of bureaucracy and individual freedom hides the deeper agreement that these are the only two modes of social life available to us (33).^2

In combatting the universalist claim of emotivism, MacIntyre argues strongly that all moral theories are products of their historical contexts, with a specific heritage, and must be understood in that light. A major part of his project in *After Virtue*, therefore, is outlining the history of moral philosophy; not in a general way, as he does in *A Short History of Ethics* (1966), but with the express purpose of demonstrating the “breakdown” of morality to its present confused state, where emotivism is espoused. As it is key to my own purposes in the present work, I will stay with MacIntyre’s line of thought.

As predecessors in this process of breakdown, MacIntyre identifies three key Enlightenment figures: Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard. Each presents a very different foundation for morality, to the exclusion of the others. In fact, MacIntyre argues, they all manage to discredit each other: “. . . the vindication of each position was made to rest in crucial part upon the failure of the other two, and the sum total of the effective criticism of each position by the others turned out to be the failure of all” (1981, 47-48). This is the ultimate heritage of modern morality: “The project of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed; and from henceforth the morality of our predecessor culture – and subsequently of our own – lacked any public, shared rationale or justification” (48).

In seeking deeper reasons for this failure, MacIntyre plunges further back in time, relentlessly unearthing the historical background to modern moral culture. He looks specifically

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^2It is worth noting that MacIntyre wrote *After Virtue* when the Cold War was a well-entrenched part of Western society, and the opposition between ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’ – i.e., capitalism/Communism – was magnified.
to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for the structure of pre-modern ethics. As mentioned earlier, the main feature here is some account of the human *telos*: “The precepts which enjoin the various virtues and prohibit the vices which are their counterparts instruct us how to move from potentiality to act, how to realise our true nature and to reach our true end” (50). Desires and emotions, reason, and the end good of rational happiness all have their place in the structure of ethics. MacIntyre summarizes:

> We thus have a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-*telos*. Each of the three elements of the scheme – the conception of untutored nature, the conception of the precepts of rational ethics and the conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-*telos* – requires reference to the other two if its status and function are to be intelligible. (50-51)

This scheme remains essentially the same, says MacIntyre, when placed within a framework of theistic beliefs (though there are some alterations).

The crucial change comes with the later thinkers – Pascal, Diderot, and Smith, in addition to the three principles mentioned above – who despite their disagreements on human nature nonetheless *all* reject “any teleological view of human nature, any view of man as having an essence which defines his true end” (52). As Grant describes it, this is when the history-making spirit starts to soundly replace theories of natural law in philosophical culture. And this, according to MacIntyre, is why “their project of finding a basis for morality had to fail”; the removal of one of the three required elements for a coherent ethical structure (52). He elaborates on this inevitable failure of the project of 18th-century moral philosophers: “…they did indeed attempt to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human
nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other. This discrepancy was not removed by their revised beliefs about human nature” (53).

A crucial part of the transition was the sharp distinction made between evaluative statements or moral injunctions on the one hand, and factual statements on the other. As MacIntyre explains, “within the Aristotelian tradition to call $x$ good (where $x$ may be among other things a person or an animal or a policy or a state of affairs) is to say that it is the kind of $x$ which someone would choose who wanted an $x$ for the purpose for which $x$’s are characteristically wanted” (56-57). Moral language is thus bound up with function or purpose. As he points out, this is true for the concept of a ‘good person’ as much as anything else. Moral and evaluative statements are thus factual, and “can be called true or false in precisely the way in which all other factual statements can be so called” (57).

Again, however, this is fundamentally altered with the rejection of human teleology. “Up to the present in everyday discourse,” says MacIntyre, “the habit of speaking of moral judgments as true or false persists; but the question of what it is in virtue of which a particular moral judgment is true or false has come to lack any clear answer” (57). This makes sense in the progression (or regression) of concepts of morality he describes: “That this should be so is perfectly intelligible if the historical hypothesis which I have sketched is true: that moral judgments are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices” (57).

MacIntyre sums up his points about this transition from a coherent moral framework to an “impoverished” one:
On the one hand the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand the inherited, if partially transformed rules of morality have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their even more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimately divine law. If such rules cannot be found a new status which will make appeal to them rational, appeal to them will indeed appear as a mere instrument of individual desire and will. Hence there is a pressure to vindicate them either by devising some new teleology or by finding some new categorical status for them. (60)

The first project, devising a new teleology, was the initial thrust of utilitarianism. Bentham, in particular, reduced the human telos to the maximization of pleasure and reduction (ultimately, outright removal) of pain (60). Ultimately, however, with no set criteria of ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’ – and the fact that human happiness is not unitary – the derivation of morality from this psychology fails, and with it “the whole of rational grounding for Bentham’s project of a new naturalistic theology” (61). The teleological content thus dwindled and ultimately disappeared, leading, through Sidgwick, to G.E. Moore’s theory of intuitionism. This, in turn, as MacIntyre demonstrates, paves the way for emotivism. This also points up the natural fit of emotivism as a dominant theory of morality in modernity with utilitarianism as the favoured tool for calculating means (including, as we shall see, the one best means) in technological society; with any idea of teleology removed, the tool itself is seen as value-neutral and thus appropriate for all ‘assessments’ (including cost-benefit and risk analyses).

Parallel to the failure of utilitarianism to provide a new teleology, says MacIntyre, is the failure of neo-Kantianism in trying to show that “any rational agent is logically committed to the rules of morality in virtue of his or her rationality” (64).

MacIntyre argues that the meaning of moral expressions would only be warranted if either
of these projects had succeeded in providing the newly autonomous moral agent with rational justification for his or her moral positions (which they did not); at the same time, the emotivist use of moral expressions “is precisely what one would expect of the philosophical projects had all failed” (66). This brings us to the confused state of affairs he describes in the opening pages of After Virtue, and again to the mode of manipulation as characteristic of modern moral interaction.

Again, MacIntyre’s summary is most apt:

> Contemporary moral experience as a consequence has a paradoxical character. For each of us is taught to see himself or herself as an autonomous moral agent; but each of us also becomes engaged by modes of practice, aesthetic or bureaucratic, which involve us in manipulative relationships with others. Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire ourselves not to be manipulated by others; seeking to incarnate our own principles and stand-point in the world of practice, we find no way open to do so except by directing towards others those very manipulative modes of relationship which each of us aspires to resist in our own case. The incoherence of our attitudes and our experience arises from the incoherent conceptual scheme which we have inherited. (66)

Manipulative modes of interaction are not well-suited to espousing a ‘higher’ cause (i.e., outside the immediate defense of one’s own autonomy), such as environmentalism. They are inherently self-oriented, thus making advocating for something outside the self a somewhat alien form of argument.

Directly related to this, MacIntyre identifies three particular concepts attendant to the modern moral scheme: those of rights, protest, and unmasking (66). The first two in particular are of interest in the context of environmentalism. MacIntyre likens belief in human rights to “belief in witches and in unicorns”; there are no good, convincing reasons to believe in any of them (67). One would assume this extends to any notion of the ‘rights’ of nature. Like the concept of ‘utility,’ the definitions are arbitrary. This, says MacIntyre, is a “central characteristic
of moral fictions”: “. . . they purport to provide us with an objective and impersonal criterion, but they do not” (68). Again, what results is moral incommensurability. The concept of rights and that of utility “are a matching pair of incommensurable fictions,” employed only with “mock rationality” that “conceals the arbitrariness of the will and power at work in its resolution” (68).

This, MacIntyre further argues, explains the predominance of protest as moral expression in modernity. Protest, he says, “is now almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone’s rights in the name of someone else’s utility” (68). It is interesting to pause here and consider the case of environmentalism. Although there is no doubt that much of what characterizes the environmental movement is protest, and further that it is protest against a form of utility, it is rarely expressed in terms of ‘rights.’ Speaking of the ‘rights’ of nature, as I suggested earlier, would make one susceptible to the same critique MacIntyre levels at the concept of ‘human rights.’ When asked what they are defending, environmentalists (based on my interaction with SCC activists) are more likely to say ‘nature’ or ‘the Earth’ than the rights of nature or the Earth. This is an important distinction, because for the former there are fewer resources in the predominant forms of moral interaction in modernity (as characterized by MacIntyre). The implication is not the defense of an autonomous moral agent, but of a moral principle, with an attendant notion of good or higher purpose: it is wrong to despoil the Earth as we have. This, of course, goes completely against the tenor of predominant moral discourse.

Out of the confusion that characterizes modern morality, and given the hodgepodge of moral notions (and fictions) that exist, MacIntyre singles out Nietzsche’s moral philosophy as “one of the two genuine theoretical alternatives confronting anyone trying to analyse the moral
condition of our culture” (104). Nietzsche is, in his view, “the moral philosopher of the present age”; in *The Gay Science* in particular, says MacIntyre, “he disposes of both what I have called the Enlightenment project to discover rational foundations for an objective morality and of the confidence of the everyday moral agent in post-Enlightenment culture that his moral practice and utterance are in good order” (107). For Nietzsche, famously, morality is nothing more than the expressions of the will (and the strivings of stronger and weaker wills).

The other “genuine” theoretical alternative that MacIntyre points to is Aristotelianism. Nietzsche’s philosophy makes sense in light of the failure of the Enlightenment projects; but what if, he asks, we had not turned away from Aristotelianism in the first place? MacIntyre claims that “if Aristotle’s position in ethics and politics – or something very like it – could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would be pointless” (111). He explains: “This is because the power of Nietzsche’s position depends upon the truth of one central thesis: that all rational vindications of morality manifestly fail and that *therefore* belief in the tenets of morality needs to be explained in terms of a set of rationalisations which conceal the fundamentally non-rational phenomena of the will” (111).

Thus for MacIntyre, a thorough historical analysis of morality leaves only two clear theoretical alternatives in modernity: Aristotle or Nietzsche. The Nietzschean diagnosis represents the logical fallout of the “aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project”; the only alternative to accepting this is to “hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have commenced in the first place” (111). The latter option means a return to some version of Aristotelianism, which is precisely what MacIntyre ends up arguing for in the latter part of *After Virtue*. 
MacIntyre points to Nietzsche’s insight that Enlightenment moralities failed to address or answer the question ‘What sort of person am I to become?’ (this being ignored with the expulsion of Aristotelian teleology); he also points out Ronald Dworkin’s contemporary argument that central to modern liberalism is the notion that “questions about the good life for man or the ends of human life are to be regarded from the public standpoint as systematically unsettled” (112). Instead, “rules become the primary concept of the moral life. Qualities of character then generally come to be prized only because they will lead us to follow the right set of rules” (112).³

Following Aristotle, MacIntyre suggests that we instead “attend to virtues in the first place in order to understand the function and authority of rules” (112). This leads him in After Virtue to a history and analysis of classical virtue ethics, centred around Aristotle.

Ultimately, one might identify the core of MacIntyre’s discussion in After Virtue as a lament for the replacement of Aristotelian teleology with emotivist theories of human agency and morality. Horton and Mendus provide a nice summary of the overall picture this paints:

Post-Enlightenment man is seen as governed, not by a telos external to him, but simply by the dictates of his own inner reason. And the result of this move from a teleology independent of the will of the individual to an internally given rationality is that we can no longer coherently distinguish, as Aristotle did, between what we are and what we should be. In consequence, our understanding of the virtues has become deformed, and our moral language has degenerated into an incoherent set of rules or principles deprived of teleological background which originally gave them meaning: for without this background, we find ourselves with no secure point of reference against which to adjudicate between rival moral positions. Hence the interminable and ultimately pointless character of modern moral argument. (1994, 6-7)

With this I will halt my account of MacIntyre’s analysis in After Virtue; at this stage I am more

³Again, when we come to Ellul, we will see how this might be considered part and parcel with the ‘technicizing’ of moral character.
interested in his characterization of modern morality (framed, as it is, as a critique). He is more prescriptive in his two follow-up works *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, to which I will later briefly turn, particularly in elaborating on his notion of a *tradition*.

Particularly in *After Virtue*, however, one gets a sense that MacIntyre is close to theoretical panic concerning the state of modern morality. His insights are penetrating, and are indeed borne out in the confusion and shrillness of much modern moral discourse; but we must not lose sight of the simple fact that we are all, regardless of historical context, *ethical* beings. That is to say, we construct meaning, have values and beliefs, and strive to achieve and live by them. Segundo’s analysis at the very least gives us a template for this. It is impossible for us to be ultimately bereft of moral orientation, as confused and at times incoherent as our language may be. It is for this reason that I wish to balance MacIntyre’s account of modern morality by that given by Charles Taylor, particularly in his work *Sources of the Self*. Though MacIntyre and Taylor end up in positions not vastly different, the latter’s account of the making of modern identity and the moral sources of modernity is somewhat more detailed and, I believe, more nuanced. It is to Taylor’s insights that I now turn before looking at possible ‘next steps’ coming out of both thinkers, particularly as they pertain to environmentalism.

**Taylor’s analysis**

The transition from MacIntyre to Taylor can easily be made through the latter’s published material on the former, including Taylor’s review of *After Virtue*. He agrees with much of MacIntyre’s analysis, though he does not wholly share the doom-and-gloom conclusion. It is not
necessarily the case that ‘good morality’ is impossible, Taylor points out, but that it is very
difficult in our society, given MacIntyre’s characterization: “What would remain true on this
reading is that modern bureaucratic capitalist society is very inhospitable to the best moral
thinking of which we are capable” (Taylor 1984, 305). Taylor goes on to say that it is not simply
that we have lost virtue, nor is it unique to our times to have an idea of a free, responsible subject:
“What is new, and alarming, is that this moral vision sustains and is itself sustained by an
increasingly bureaucratic society, and that together they foster a neglect and forgetfulness of the
background of virtues and practices without which this moral vision itself constantly tends to
become distorted and trivialized” (306).

These points in and of themselves do not contradict what MacIntyre is saying; however,
Taylor does offer a critique of After Virtue: “MacIntyre’s critique of modern society and moral
thought seems to me very one-sided. Precisely because of the importance of virtues and practices
for moral life, we need to see where new ones are arising as well as where old ones are being
abandoned and lost” (306). He acknowledges that MacIntyre’s critique is presented with
“brilliance and insight”; but by the same token, “our task is equally to discern and nurture the
coherent moral visions of the good life” (306). Despite our inheritance of a mixed moral scheme,
we do not, according to Taylor, operate without some moral visions, and these are worth
exploring. Elsewhere, he raises two primary questions concerning the line of argument in After
Virtue:

First, is the substantive ethical vision which spawned the false meta-ethic to be just
abandoned, or can/ought it to be rescued in some form? Second, to the extent that
it must be abandoned, is this package of inadequate views to be taken seriously in
our diagnosis of modernity and what underlies a coherent but bad, dangerous and
destructive practice or way of life? Or should it be discounted in part at least as
confusion, rendering us blind to our actual ways of thinking and reacting, and hence no doubt potentially dangerous and destructive, but not precisely in the ways which the false theory indicates on its face? (1994, 23)

Taylor thus wants to rescue some modern forms of moral vision while recognizing (and ultimately discounting) our confused inheritances of post-Enlightenment thought; something MacIntyre would consider impossible.

Building from MacIntyre’s analysis, Taylor notes that the key difference between Aristotelian ethics and modern ones is that the elements and qualities of the good life are both causes of and constitutive of human good on the former view, whereas on the latter, means must be clearly distinguished from ends, so that “virtues can only be good instrumentally” (25). He draws a distinction between “substantive notions of ethics and procedural notions of ethics”; the latter involve theories, primarily utilitarianism and Kantianism, that affirm “the modern notion of freedom” (27). With procedural ethics, there is no notion of higher good: “The right solution, that which enjoys henceforth the aura of a higher or moral way, is that which emerges from the rational procedure” of ordering and summing (for utilitarianism in particular) “de facto goods” (27).

Along the same lines as MacIntyre, Taylor rejects these kinds of theory. He says with no trace of subtlety: “I just want to state baldly that procedural theories seem to me to be incoherent. Better put, that to be made coherent they require restatement in substantive form” (27). The weakness, he says, comes out when one asks: “What is the basis of the hierarchy [procedural theories] do recognize? What makes it mandatory to follow the privileged procedures? The answer has to lie in some understanding of human life and reason, in some positive doctrine of man, and hence the good” (28). Thus, notions of the good must underlie theories of the right in
order to remain coherent. This is of crucial importance to understanding both the place of environmental ethics, and modern forms of spirituality/religiosity generally, which I will examine more closely in the latter part of this chapter and later. Taylor argues that the “modern procedural meta-ethic,” in contrast to Aristotelianism, does not recognize – that is, willingly blinds itself – to the multiplicity of goods, both internal to practices and transcendent of them, and the dilemmas that arise when they conflict (42).

Like MacIntyre, Taylor echoes Grant’s *Philosophy in the Mass Age* when, in contrasting the differences between pre-modern and modern conceptions of ethics, he talks about a shift in cosmology. He says in *Human Agency and Language* (1985): “In a sense, the great shift in cosmology which occurred in the seventeenth century, from a picture of the world-order based on the Ideas to one of the universe of mechanism, was the founding objectification, the source and inspiration for the continuing development of a disengaged modern consciousness” (4-5). And again like MacIntyre, Taylor recognizes the centrality of the elimination of a notion of teleology. We lose our teleology, our sense of *ends*, by our disengagement from the world; this characterizes (and continues to be attractive to) modern humanity, particularly in modern sciences and technology. As Taylor states: “We objectify our situation to the extent that we can overcome a sense of it as what determines for us our paradigm purposes and ends, and can come to see it and function in it as a neutral environment, within which we can effect the purposes which we determine out of ourselves” (4).

There can be little doubt that the questions raised by MacIntyre and subsequently responded to by Taylor at least partly influenced the latter’s extensive work on modern moral sources. His *magnum opus* in this regard, of course, is *Sources of the Self* (1989), and it is
primarily to this work that I turn in drawing from Taylor’s thought. The sheer scope and breadth of it would justify my choice to focus primarily on this text; but Taylor himself says of his substantial two-volume *Philosophical Papers* that even they are “mainly promissary notes” (1985, 8), presumably to be redeemed in the larger project he had already begun work on. A detailed and comprehensive summary of *Sources of the Self* would itself be book-length; I will restrict my own focus mainly to Part I and the Conclusion.

MacIntyre, because of his emphasis on the historical context of morality and the plurality of goods, constantly had to refute the charge of relativism levelled against him (which is ironic, given his general espousal of classical over modern understandings of morality). Similarly, Taylor tries to combat this charge in attempting to contextualize understandings of the good in historical-cultural-social milieus, including the notion that the ideas of good in different milieus are radically unbridgeable. Though he allows for the idea of incommensurability, he suggests that when faced with other cultures/societies with different notions of the good, “we don’t start with a preshrunk moral universe in which we take as given that their goods have nothing to say to us or perhaps ours to them” (1989, 62). But he also refutes the notion that goods are generally relative, i.e., not objective or ‘real.’ To say that “good and right are merely relative” and “not anchored in the real’ is to “fall into an important confusion” (56).

This, for Taylor, relates specifically to language: “For our language of deliberation is continuous with our language of assessment, and this with the language in which we explain what people do and feel” (57). Taylor writes extensively on the importance evaluative language, and how it demonstrates the real and non-relative character of the goods and our relationship to them, in several different works. In one of his essays in his *Philosophical Arguments* (1995), he
examines Heidegger’s conception of language as a development of what he calls the “expressive-constitutive” tradition; this, I believe, encapsulates nicely the thread of his argument, so I will stray from Sources briefly and turn to it.

The expressive-constitutive tradition of language emerged first in reaction to the dominant view where language is conceived purely as an instrument (Taylor 1995, 101). In this classic “enframing” view, put forth by Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac, “language is understood in terms of certain elements: ideas, signs, and their association, which precede its arising. Before and after, the imagination is at work and association takes place” (102). The constitutive view, according to Taylor, was first articulated by Herder (in response to Condillac), who “starts from the intuition that language makes possible a different kind of consciousness, which he calls reflective (besonnen)” (103). Language, in this view, is a fundamental part of who we are and how we understand ourselves within the larger world. In particular, argues Taylor, the “nonreductive rightness” of particular words are constitutive of self-understanding, and our relations with one another (103-104).

This understanding of language relates significantly to ethics, in how we value. Taylor illustrates: “Prelinguistic animals treat something as desirable or repugnant, by going after it or avoiding it. But only language beings can identify things as worthy of desire or aversion” (106).

What goes along with the constitutive view of language is the creative role of expression (107). Expression has more range and depth in this view, relating to the constitutive features of language. As Taylor states: “We express our emotions, establish our relations, and articulate our values in our body language, style, and rhetoric; but we can also articulate all of that in poetry, novels, dance, music; and we can also bring all of that to descriptive articulation, where we name
the feelings, relations, values, and describe and argue about them” (111).

Heidegger, says Taylor, moves this tradition forward in his own way, seeing language “as the condition of the human world being disclosed”; it “opens access to meanings” (112). It should be noted that these points are made in the overall context of connecting Heidegger’s concept of language with ecology, specifically Deep Ecology. According to Taylor, the expressive-constitutive tradition of language allows for a richer connection with non-human nature, whose agency independent of humans is acknowledged and respected. This obviously relates to Heidegger’s phenomenology in general; the idea of nature or the world making demands on us, and the limits of human domination (100). This point should be born in mind when considering Taylor’s own understanding of language, and how it engages us with the phenomenal (and also for him, ‘noumenal’/supernatural/theistic/Ideal) world.

Taylor’s own theory of language can also be situated in the expressive-constitutive tradition, again relating specifically to ethics in how we engage with and value things. His key notion is that of strong evaluation, which Taylor talks about in several of his works. In Human Agency and Language, for instance, he argues that our self-understanding includes a background of strong evaluation; distinctions of worth, including things that are of unconditioned worth/importance. He explains: “. . . to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers” (3). This above all is why Taylor argues against purely naturalistic understandings of the self, which aspire to understand and define personhood in completely neutral terms; our evaluations are essential to who we think we are, and are not eliminable from the discourse.
What distinguishes strong evaluation from weak evaluation is that “strong evaluation is concerned with the qualitative worth of different desires” (16). In other words, rather than simply evaluating something on what would be more desirable, the motivation, the worth of the desires is taken into account and evaluated. This is squarely in the realm of ethics, because judgments of worth involve discrimination between goods, and include certain absolute or incontestable goods (both Segundo and Taylor argue this). Taylor states: “Strong evaluation is not just a condition of articulacy about preferences, but also about the quality of life, the kind of beings we are or want to be” (26). Despite post-Enlightenment confusion, Aristotle’s analysis of ethics remains valid.

Like Segundo, Taylor recognizes a process of hierarchizing of values, or in his view goods: “Most of us not only live with many goods, but find that we have to rank them, and in some cases, this ranking makes one of them of supreme importance relative to the others” (Taylor 1989, 62). This echoes Segundo’s absolute value, which as we have seen is a crucial part of his theory of faith and ideologies. Taylor links a sense of identity and meaning with orientation toward this highest or primary good, or “hypergood” (63). He identifies certain common hypergoods that characterize modernity, such as “a notion of universal justice and/or benevolence” (64). Taylor more explicitly than Segundo links hypergoods with a specific moral culture, understood contextually/historically (Segundo speaks more universally, though he incorporates the importance of tradition).

When it comes to moral discourse, Taylor notes a potential objection to the idea of comparing hypergoods, and judging some superior to others; this seems impossible, according to the dominant view of rational discourse, without an outside standard to determine the ‘correct’ position. Taylor believes that it is possible, without requiring reference to a position that is
correct absolutely. He argues that practical reasoning, rather than establishing an absolutely correct position, is concerned with “comparative propositions,” and transition from one to another: “We show one of these comparative claims to be well founded when we can show that the move from A to B constitutes a gain epistemically” (72). In the context of morality, this relates to how we live; our moral experience. He elaborates: “We are convinced that a certain view is superior because we have lived a transition which we understand as error-reducing and hence as epistemic gain” (72). This view can be challenged, but not by looking to outside ‘criteria’ to decide the issue (the dominantly held “bad model of practical reasoning”): “You will only convince me by changing my reading of my moral experience, and in particular my reading of my life story, of the transitions I have lived through – or perhaps refused to live through” (72-73). The “bad” model demands that we turn to “some considerations which could be established even outside the perspectives in dispute and which would nevertheless be decisive”; but, as Taylor says, “there cannot be such considerations” (73). He explains: “My perspective is defined by the moral intuitions I have, by what I am morally moved by. If I abstract from this, I become incapable of understanding any moral argument at all” (73).

Significantly, Taylor notes that hypergoods “often make essential reference to beings or realities which transcend human life, as Plato does to the Idea of the Good, or theistic views do to God, and some Romantic-derived views do to Nature as a great source” (73). But even here, it is not necessary to move from the outside standard to a certain moral reaction or intuition. Taylor explains: “. . . nothing prevents a priori our coming to see God or the Good as essential to our best account of the human moral world. There is no question here of our ever being able to come to recognize this by prescinding from our moral intuitions. Rather our acceptance of any
hypergood is connected in a complex way with our being moved by it” (73). This does not mean that hypergoods are established as such – as essentially good – because they move us in a certain way. The “most salient features of our moral phenomenology” indicate that the reverse is true: “We sense in the very experience of being moved by some higher good that we are moved by what is good in it rather than that it is valuable because of our reaction” (74). This, again, allows for a certain apodictically non-relative content in hypergoods. We can be wrong about hypergoods, but just as significantly, we can be right: “The only way to decide is by raising and facing this or that particular critique. Is there a transition out of my present belief which turns on an error-reducing move?” (74).

Taylor echoes his points about the role of hypergoods in his later work *A Secular Age*, mentioned earlier in the context of the secularization debate. By way of his introduction, he gives a brief phenomenology of moral/spiritual (these concepts purposely put together) experience, including contact with and orientation toward “fullness”: “Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be” (5). Though the particular lived experiences of “believers” and “unbelievers” provide the unique context of secularism that he wishes to explore, orientation towards this “fullness” is a common human experience.

What we can infer from these points, among other things, is that we live in a morally ordered world, despite the confusion and incoherence of some of our dominant moral language (and theory). As strong evaluators, we cannot help but live by certain values or goods, including some sense of hypergoods or more ‘absolute’ values. We are morally oriented beings; we have
moral intuitions. It could not be otherwise: “. . . the suggestion that it might all be illusion and that I ought to defend myself against this possibility by stepping altogether outside any reliance either on intuition or any sense of purchase” is by its nature an impossible demand (75). Further, our intuitions can be linked with something transcendent, such as an idea of God or the good; these are not merely projections of our desires and values. Taylor is arguing for this in the face of a model of natural science (which is the predominant perspective of modernity) that claims the opposite; that values are simply projected feelings onto a neutral world, and that finding the ‘correct’ position (moral or otherwise) demands resorting to neutral criteria, standards of ‘correctness.’ We have seen a similar critique of such assumed neutrality by MacIntyre of emotivism; we will see it of technological society by Ellul. Also key with Taylor (and in fact for MacIntyre) is that we need not always be stuck in complete incommensurability; we can, in fact, communicate between goods, and even notions of higher goods, without recourse to an agreed-upon and specifically defined absolute outside standard (such as a traditional concept of God).

What Taylor refers to as “qualitative distinctions,” discriminations between (generally) higher and lower actions, feelings, or modes of life, are our definitions of the good. Articulating them is “articulating what underlies our ethical choices, leanings, intuitions” (77). Qualitative distinctions do not offer external reasons for moral behaviour; they offer articulations of “the moral point of our actions,” our moral intuitions (77). There is hence a plurality of operative goods; there is no one basic reason for our moral obligations, as given in much modern moral philosophy, particularly utilitarianism and Kantianism. Unifying our moral views “around a single moral base” (76) eradicates the distinction between goods or hypergoods; utilitarianism, for instance, recognizes only one good, happiness, and “the only standard which remains is the
maximization of its fulfilment” (78).

Even with utilitarianism, however, there are clear distinctions between higher and lower motives. Taylor attributes this strange blindness to “the tendency in contemporary philosophy to give a very narrow focus to morality”: “Morality is considered purely as a guide to action. It is thought to be concerned purely with what it is right to do rather than with what it is good to be” (79). This relates to the dominance of naturalism (which I touched on earlier), and its “belief that we ought to understand human beings in terms continuous with the sciences of extra-human nature” (80); a mechanistic understanding that leaves little place for qualitative distinctions of the kind Taylor is talking about. But he also attributes the concern of modern moral philosophies with action to the (unacknowledged) hypergood of the affirmation of ordinary life, and its (paradoxical) rejection of the idea of ‘higher’ goods (81). This combines with modern notion of the freedom of the individual subject, not bound by any external notion of the good (as MacIntyre and Grant also discuss), the modern emphasis on practical benevolence (again, focussed on action), and the “desire for a fully universal ethic” (85). Each of these interrelated characteristics of modernity have traceable intellectual histories, which Taylor explains in detail throughout Sources of the Self, culminating in a specific idea of morality that is suspicious or outright dismissive of the place of operative notions of the good and qualitative distinctions.

Again, we can see how this relates to the theory of emotivism, and it will be easily seen how this corresponds to technique. Ethics are functional, and what is ‘truly’ important or valuable (beyond simply the whims and desires of individuals) becomes very narrow indeed. Further, how one is trying to arrive at an ethical decision becomes more important than why or to what end. As I mentioned earlier, Taylor distinguishes on the one hand the Kantians and
utilitarians who advance a *procedural* conception of ethics from the (generally) Ancient
*substantive* conception; as opposed to the criterion of practical reason being “getting it right,”
getting at substantive truth, the concern in modern moral philosophy is with *how* the rational
agent thinks (85-86). This relates to a shift away from the notion of the good; he notes that “once
we sideline a sense or vision of the good and consider it irrelevant to moral thinking, then our
notion of practical reasoning has to be procedural” (86). This is reflected in the championing of
the *right* over the good in predominant moral theories of obligatory action (88).

Like MacIntyre, then, Taylor arrives a deeply critical position towards “these strange
cramped theories of modern moral philosophy” (89). Incorporating the various points he has
made, he offers this general picture:

Impelled by the strongest metaphysical, epistemological, and moral ideas of the
modern age, these theories narrow our focus to the determinants of action, and
then restrict our understanding of these determinants still further by defining
practical reason as exclusively procedural. They utterly mystify the priority of the
moral by identifying it not with substance but with a form of reasoning, around
which they draw a firm boundary. They then are led to defend this boundary all
the more fiercely in that it is their only way of doing justice to the hypergoods
which move them although they cannot acknowledge them. (89)

Taylor’s moral phenomenology, through a related but slightly different route than MacIntyre’s,
impels him to expose this incoherence, in an effort to understand our genuine sources of morality
in modernity. Our moral motivations are not completely arbitrary. “It is a form of self-delusion,”
he says, “to think that we do not speak from a moral orientation which we take to be right” (99).
The articulation of goods, hampered by both modern naturalist approaches and neo-Nietzschean
ones, is necessary to understand the range of ethical disputes in modernity.

Taylor, unlike MacIntyre, comments specifically on environmentalism in *Sources of the*
The problem with obligatory theories of ethics, he says, particularly with regard to the environment, is that there is no place for non-human goods. On issues of ‘extra-human’ claims, both obligatory and neo-Nietzschean theories “prejudge them irrevocably”:

This they do not because they are inspired by one side but because this inspiration is hidden, where it can’t come up for debate. The human-centredness is then unassailable. It appears in the (supposed) defining characteristics of moral theory, such as the maximization of general happiness, or action on a maxim that can be universalized, or action on a norm that all participants could accept in unconstrained debate. The claims of the non-human (or at the very outside, of the non-animate) cannot be heard in frameworks of this kind. (103)

By contrast, theories of ethics that recognize the plurality of goods and hypergoods, and our orientation towards them, can allow for extra-human claims. I will come back to this in more detail at the end of the chapter.

After spending the bulk of Sources of the Self explaining in detail the complex histories of the various concepts that have gone into the making of modern morality and identity, Taylor identifies three main sources: theism, naturalistic disengaged reason, and Romantic expressivism (495). Only by digging up the multiple roots of modern forms of morality is it “possible to show the connections between the modern moral outlook and its multiple sources on the one hand, and the different evolving conceptions of the self and its characteristic powers, on the other; and to show how these concepts of the self are connected with certain notions of inwardness, which are thus peculiarly modern and are themselves interwoven with the moral outlook” (498). Modern identity is closely bound to the multiple sources of modern morality.

Taylor further identifies three “standing areas of tension” in modern moral culture: “uncertainty and division concerning constitutive goods”; “conflict between disengaged instrumentalism and the Romantic or modern protest against it”; and the compatibility of modern
moral standards with expressive fulfilment (stemming from Nietzsche’s critique) (498-499).⁴ All three areas relate and are relevant to the present discussion. The second area of tension, however, seems most directly relevant to environmentalism; certainly a great deal of environmental philosophy focuses its critique on the consequences of disengaged, instrumental reason, usually from a post-Romantic understanding of nature. This aspect of Taylor’s conclusion deserves a closer look; it also happens to be the one in which he goes into the most detail.

Taylor outlines several aspects of the modern attack on instrumentalism, both its experiential and public consequences. He notes the claim that “an instrumental society, one in which, say, a utilitarian outlook is entrenched in the institutions of a commercial, capitalist, and finally a bureaucratic mode of existence, tends to empty life of its richness, depth, or meaning” (500). This would not be an uncommon claim against the state of life in much of modern Western society. He offers another example:

The charge may be that the instrumental mode of life, by dissolving traditional communities or driving out earlier, less instrumental ways of living with nature, has destroyed the matrices in which meaning could formerly flourish . . . Here the exigencies of survival in capitalist (or technological) society are thought to dictate a purely instrumental pattern of action, which has the inevitable effect of destroying or marginalizing purposes of intrinsic value. (500)

This is a contention of both (many) environmentalists, speaking of our estranged relationship with non-human nature, and many contemporary religious advocates, denouncing overly materialist culture. It gets to the very crux of the present dissertation, because in this critique, and the corresponding response some people have to instrumental, technological society, is the essence of environmental ethics and the role of religion/spirituality therein. This is not to say that all

⁴Obviously, these areas seem arbitrarily determined and strangely disconnected here, without the rich and lengthy discussion of each provided in Sources of the Self. See Parts II, III, and IV in particular.
environmentalists articulate this precise critique, or that there is not a variety of motivations for environmentalism; but this, I contend (in agreement with Taylor), is the ethical—and ultimately, religious/spiritual—base of environmentalism, as a challenge to predominant attitudes in instrumental, technological society. I will return to this more fully in later chapters.

As part of his conclusion, however, Taylor warns against the oversimplified repudiation of a particular strand of modernity in the name of another:

Narrow proponents of disengaged reason point to the irrational and anti-scientific facets of Romanticism and dismiss it out of hand, blithely unaware of how much they draw on a post-Romantic interpretation of life as they seek ‘fulfilment’ and ‘expression’ in their emotional and cultural lives. On the other hand, those who condemn the fruits of disengaged reason in technological society or political atomism make the world simpler than it is when they see their opponents as motivated by a drive to ‘dominate nature’ or to deny all dependence on others, and in fact conveniently occlude the complex connections in the modern understanding of the self between disengagement and self-responsible freedom and individual rights, or those between instrumental reason and the affirmation of ordinary life. Those who flaunt the most radical denials and repudiations of selective facets of the modern identity generally go on living by variants of what they deny. There is a large component of delusion in their outlook. (503-504)

This is part of the general inarticulacy of modern moral culture that both Taylor and MacIntyre want to call attention to. It is an important point, but one that must be counterbalanced by the fact that instrumental/procedural ethics have become the dominant form of moral discourse in technological society, making it very difficult to effectively advocate a social cause such as environmentalism (or, for that matter, a more specifically religious cause) which explicitly espouses a vision of the good. It is safe to say, though, that both thinkers (along with, I would say, Segundo, Grant, and Ellul) would be sympathetic on this point. All show a recognition of the severe imbalance in modern society towards procedural, technological theories of ethics and modes of society generally.
Again, part of what we must be cautious of is how we speak of the issues. I have been guilty of using the term ‘values,’ for instance, quite easily; Segundo, Grant, and Taylor all warn against what this can imply. In the modern context, says Taylor, ‘values’ can reflect an overly subjectivist perspective; purely subjective goods sought in the quest for self-fulfilment (507). Part of what Taylor is advocating, and what I see as inherent to environmental ethics, is the urgent need to regain an understanding of the place of goods independent of the self. Taylor in fact connects this explicitly with environmentalism: “It would greatly help in staving off ecological disaster if we could recover a sense of the demand that our natural surrounding and wilderness make on us. The subjectivist bias that both instrumentalism and the ideologies of personal fulfilment make almost inescapable makes it almost impossible to state the case here” (513).

Taylor also reminds us that a critique of “disengaged subjectivity” need not “invalidate (though it may limit the scope of) self-responsible reason and freedom” (514). The debate, he says, is too easily polarized, just as a critique of science and technology can be construed (and sometimes, though rarely, explicitly argued as) ‘anti-science’ and ‘anti-technology.’ He says elsewhere that disengaged subjectivity is too closely bound to modern identity to be categorically dismissed: “. . . the disengaged identity is far from being simply wrong and misguided, and besides, we are all too deeply imbued with it to be able really and authentically to repudiate it” (1985, 7).

Moving forward

What Taylor comes to in the final few pages of *Sources of the Self* is perhaps the closest to an explicit statement of his real motivation for undertaking its writing: “The intention of this work was one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation – and
thereby to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit” (1989, 520). While recognizing that they have sometimes, in the name of organized religion in particular, led to “mutilation or destruction,” spiritual aspirations of humans have been too completely stifled by the “stripped-down secular outlook” of modernity (520).

“We have read so many goods out of our story,” says Taylor, “we have buried their power so deep beneath layers of philosophical rationale, that they are in danger of stifling. Or rather, since they are our goods, human goods, we are stifling” (520). In the end, Sources of the Self is decidedly backward- and present-looking, rather than forward-looking; Taylor is admittedly not entirely clear on how to proceed. However, his suggestion of the need to re-articulate and re-incorporate a sense of the goods into our moral discourse – and his implicit (and sometimes explicit) connection of this with religion/spirituality – does leave the torch in a good position to be passed on. I would argue that environmental ethics are well-suited for receiving it.

Taylor is more explicit about what he thinks needs to be done in The Malaise of Modernity (1991), his published Massey lectures that is in many ways a more succinct version of Sources of the Self. In particular, the answer to one of the three malaises he identifies, individualism, is to be true to the ethic of authenticity, which is a genuine and valid moral source in modernity. Critics of modernity fear atomism and complete moral relativity given the predominance of individualism, where moral horizons are lost. The culture of self-fulfilment need not be understood only in its debased form of narcissistic self-indulgence and moral laxity, however; there is a genuine and redeemable moral ideal behind it “of being true to oneself, in a

5The other two being the primacy of instrumental reason, and lack of participation and choice in democratic politics (what Tocqueville calls ‘soft despotism’).
specifically modern understanding of that term” (Taylor 1991, 15). The ethic of authenticity stems from the 18th-century notion of being true to our internal moral sense, our “voice within” (26); it develops into a moral emphasis on self-articulation and self-realization. But this is not relativism, because there is still a shared moral framework, or “horizons of significance”: “Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen – the case where authenticity is actually grounded on self-determining freedom – depends on the understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life . . . Horizons are given” (39). For there to be a moral ideal of self-choosing, there must be “other issues of significance beyond self-choice. The ideal couldn’t stand alone, because it requires a horizon of issues of importance, which help define the respects in which self-making is significant” (39-40). To shut oneself away from outside standards of significance is ultimately self-defeating; further, it does not fulfil the demands of an ideal of authenticity. “Authenticity,” says Taylor, “is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands” (41). This, of course, would be key for an environmental ethic.

Thus Taylor suggests “that we undertake a work of retrieval, that we identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticize these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal” (72). Freedom can have higher and lower forms. The same holds true for disengaged, instrumental reason; as debased as it has become in the service of control and dominance (particularly with respect to the environment), it too is connected to genuine moral ideals, namely the “affirmation of ordinary life that has the moral thrust of benevolence and relieving the suffering in the human condition” (104). Instrumental reason has a “crucial place” in this “practical and universal benevolence” (105).
Clearly, then, according to Taylor, we can find solutions within the moral ideals of modernity. He specifically says his “work of retrieval” is “neither root-and-branch condemnation nor uncritical praise; and not a carefully balanced trade-off” of these moral ideals (23). Though he may agree with the thrust of MacIntyre’s critique, Taylor obviously departs from him in claiming that moral incoherence is not woven into the very fabric of modernity. For Taylor, recapturing a sense of the goods and our relation to them can happen through the predominant ethics of modernity, particularly the ideal of authenticity.

*MacIntyre’s notion of traditions*

Before examining this in the specific context of environmentalism, let me first return to MacIntyre, and give him his due in how he suggests we move forward in clarifying our muddled understanding of morality, and coming to a kind of consensus on it; particularly in his discussion of *traditions*. He explores this in his ‘follow-up’ text to *After Virtue*, the more prescriptive *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988). In it, he examines notions of practical rationality and justice in the hopes of articulating one that modern individuals can all agree upon. He notes with caution from the outset that “any attempt to provide a radically different standpoint” from Enlightenment-derived notions of practical rationality, including the dominant modes in modernity, is “bound to be found rationally unsatisfactory in a variety of ways” (7). Likewise, those who reject reliance on rational justification (none the least of which being many religious groups) “will be equally apt to be offended” (7). Nonetheless, it is for MacIntyre a crucial project to articulate a coherent concept of justice and rationality in order to untangle our idea of morality in modernity.

MacIntyre wants to recover the notion of a *tradition*, initially rejected by Enlightenment
thinkers. He explains: “What the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind to and what we now need to recover is . . . a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition” (7). He elaborates on the characterization of a tradition later in his text: “A tradition of enquiry is more than a coherent movement of thought. It is such a movement in the course of which those engaging in that movement become aware of it and of its direction and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and to carry its enquiries forward” (326).

There are three stages, according to MacIntyre, in the initial development of a tradition: “. . . a first in which the relevant beliefs, texts, and authorities have not yet been put into question; a second in which inadequacies of various types have been identified, but not yet remedied; and a third in which responses to those inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations” (355). Despite the dialectical process, traditions are in fact anti-Hegelian, as well as anti-Cartesian. Says MacIntyre: “Traditions fail the Cartesian test of beginning from the unassailable evident truths; not only do they begin from contingent positivity, but each begins from a point different from that of the others. Traditions also fail the Hegelian test of showing that their goal is some final rational state which they share with all other movements of thought” (355).

Macintyre recognizes that again he must face the challenge of relativism; a challenge that
he does not necessarily adequately respond to. Traditions face “epistemological crises,” in which their foundational theories and rational justifications come into question; part of this requires dealing with rival truth claims in other, different traditions. This, according to MacIntyre, counters the argument that all traditions are self-contained in their rational justification (and hence that truth is relative) (366). This is clearly still open to debate. Perhaps Taylor’s argument of practical reasoning as transitional rather than relying on outside standards/criteria of correctness can come to the rescue here.

Regardless of whether or not he adequately answers the charge of relativism, MacIntyre’s characterization of traditions of enquiry as the crucial frameworks of morality is important for my purposes here. He identifies in particular three distinct traditions in the West: “... that which runs from Homer to Aristotle and later passes through Arab and Jewish writers to Albertus Magnus and Aquinas; that which is transmitted from the Bible through Augustine to Aquinas; and that which carries Scottish moral tradition from Calvinist Aristotelianism to its encounter with Hume” (326). These traditions (like all traditions), though they are characterized by different evolutions of thought, are not necessarily mutually exclusive or incommensurable, even when in conflict. In fact, he says, “a tradition becomes more mature just insofar as its adherents confront and find a rational way through or around their encounters with radically different and incompatible positions which pose the problems of incommensurability and untranslatability” (327).

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7 Interestingly, in the third ‘instalment’ of what MacIntyre saw as a connected series of books, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, he links (at least from his own Thomistic perspective) the end of moral philosophy itself as a tradition of enquiry with its emergence as an autonomous academic discipline from around the 13th century. In contrast to 14th- and 15th-century astronomy and physics, he says, which were “completed in being
The real problem arises when we try to conceive of morality outside of traditions, in the way proposed by most post-Enlightenment moral philosophers. This leads to the kind of chaos we see today:

... the history of attempts to construct a morality for tradition-free individuals, whether by an appeal to one out of several conceptions of universalizability or to one out of equally multifarious conceptions of utility or to shared intuitions or to some combination of these, has in its outcome... been a history of continuously unresolved disputes, so that there emerges no uncontested and uncontestable account of what tradition-independent morality consists in and consequently no neutral set of criteria by means of which the claims of rival and contending traditions could be adjudicated. (334)

Ironically, liberalism, which revels in individualism freed from tradition, has itself, according to MacIntyre, become a tradition, if in a somewhat paradoxical way (a kind of anti-tradition). He explains: “... liberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition whose continuities are partly defined by the interminability of the debate over such principles” (335).

This is clearly a somewhat problematic idea, as indeed some critics have pointed out. Andrew Mason, for instance, identifies the dilemma that MacIntyre faces in viewing liberalism as a tradition:

... either he has to acknowledge that one tradition may contain a plurality of incommensurable theories, each with its own conception of justice and governed by its own norms of rational inquiry; or he has to accept that the same tradition may include quite different conceptions of justice which, even though they are...
commensurable, give rise to disagreement which is sometimes as intractable as when it occurs between adherents to different traditions. (1994, 228)

Mason in fact concludes that “MacIntyre has not provided us with a justification for accepting the explanation he proposes for why contemporary disagreements among liberals, and between liberals and their critics, are so intractable” (238). This statement is somewhat questionable; MacIntyre does offer such an explanation in *After Virtue*, where he begins his account with the very fact that modern ethical positions seem incommensurable. We are, I think, quite justified in accepting MacIntyre’s explanation of the intractability of these disagreements. However, it is difficult to envision modern liberalism as a ‘post-tradition’ tradition, or ‘anti-tradition’ tradition, in the way he defines it.

MacIntyre responds to this, at least in part, by distinguishing traditions of *enquiry* from *social* and *cultural* traditions. Liberalism is a social/cultural tradition characterized by a “set of agreements to disagree”; as a “form of social life,” says MacIntyre, it is “partly constituted by its continuing internal debates between rival incommensurable points of view” (1988, 292). This, however, in some ways only enhances the confusion. The distinction between a tradition of enquiry and the “larger social and cultural traditions within which traditions of enquiry are embedded and to which they stand in varying relationships” (292) hardly clarifies in exactly what way liberalism is a tradition, and how it relates to the traditions of enquiry within it. The critique of relativism also resurfaces when he admits potential incommensurability between traditions of enquiry.

Not surprisingly, MacIntyre is more cogent in his critique of liberalism, as opposed to *genuine* traditions of enquiry (leaving aside the unresolved ambiguity of their relationship). There
is, he says, a lack of an objective or “overriding” notion of the good in modern liberal society; there are only goods, which are expressions of preferences (as I will come to, he and Taylor disagree on the idea of goods). MacIntyre states in Whose Justice?: “. . . the liberal is committed to there being no one overriding good. The recognition of a range of goods is accompanied by a recognition of a range of compartmentalized spheres within each of which some good is pursued: political, economic, familial, artistic, athletic, scientific. So it is within a variety of distinct groups that each individual pursues his or her good . . .” (337). Values are treated as preferences. The modern, liberal legal system also reflects the absence of an idea of overriding good: “The function of that system is to enforce an order in which conflict resolution takes place without invoking any overall theory of human good” (244).

MacIntyre thus ends up opposing modern liberalism, though it may in fact be a kind of dysfunctional social/cultural tradition of its own, to genuine traditions of enquiry. He offers the following contrastive summary, which I will cite in full:

Where the standpoint of a tradition requires a recognition of the different types of language-in-use through which different types of argument will have to be carried on, the standpoint of the forums of modern liberal culture presupposes the possibility of a common language for all speakers or at the very least of the translatability of any one language into any other. Where the standpoint of a tradition involves an acknowledgment that fundamental debate is between competing and conflicting understandings of rationality, the standpoint of the forums of modern liberal culture presupposes the fiction of shared, even if unformulable, universal standards of rationality. Where the standpoint of a tradition cannot be presented except in a way which takes account of the history and the historical situatedness, both of traditions themselves and of those individuals who in engage in dialogue with them, the standpoint of the forums of modern liberal culture presupposes the irrelevance of one’s history to one’s status as a participant in debate. (400)

Clearly, then, he sees it crucial that we understand ourselves as part of a tradition in order to
properly situate ourselves morally and rationally; again, this does not mean that we cannot speak to one another, but that we reject the false claims to universality.

This can lead to confusion regarding the place of the good. As we have seen, MacIntyre laments the lack of an overriding notion of the good in modernity, which has been replaced by the idea of goods as preferences. Although he is not precisely clear on the point, one might infer that traditions, through the dialectical process of encounter, questioning, and reformulation (possibly including dissolution and reformulation) at least see themselves as evolving towards the good. This comes dangerously close to Hegelianism, except as we have seen, traditions do not in MacIntyre’s view aim to merge in to a homogenized rational state (the belief in which again slips back into the mistake of universalization). One is tempted to say that MacIntyre wishes to have his cake and eat it too, in this respect; he wants to maintain a transcendent idea of the good while framing moralities based on the good in different, historically contingent traditions, where definitions of the good presumably vary with definitions of justice and rationality.

Ironically, given his critique of modern liberalism and its attendant notion of the radically free and autonomous individual agent, MacIntyre himself ultimately returns to the individual as having freedom of choice. To the person who, “not yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry, is besieged by disputes over what is just and how it is reasonable to act,” and thus seeks guidance, he responds: “That will depend upon who you are and how you understand yourself” (393). Although the emphasis is again on particular context and historical contingency, the locus is squarely on the individual agent.

The reason I am presenting MacIntyre’s notion of a tradition in such detail is twofold: first, because I believe it is important to understand what he sees as crucial in moving forward
past the modern moral incoherence which he critiques; and second, it sets up an interesting contrast with both Taylor and Segundo in assessing where we stand as both autonomous moral agents, and members of historically contingent communities. Let me now return to Taylor in this context.

**Taylor’s notion of social imaginaries**

In addition to his more recent discussion of social imaginaries, Taylor does speak of the importance of historical communities, particularly in relation to identity. Individual identity is interwoven with group identity in modernity, reflecting both the need to invent our own identities and the need for recognition by others. Individual identities, he argues, are frequently aligned with particular groups:

> If identity constitutes a moral horizon that allows [individuals] to situate themselves in the register of what is significant, people will predictably define themselves, in part, in terms of universal moral commitments (I am Catholic, Communist, Liberal, and so on). But it is also normal that they should align themselves with their membership in historical communities. A historical community does offer a horizon, through its culture and its way of life, inside which things acquire differential values. (2001, 143-144)

Group identity thus contributes to people’s moral horizons, their orientation in moral space. This clearly relates to Segundo’s notion of a tradition, where foundations of value- and meaning-structures are passed down within it, and also (though perhaps less explicitly) to MacIntyre’s. The flip side, of course, is that group identity must be recognized and accepted by constituent members: “The group can only live with an identity to the extent that many of its members define themselves in those terms” (144).

Taylor is more interested in shared public/social space, however, and how we as
autonomous individuals participate in such space. He explores this in his book *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004). In it, he aims “to sketch an account of the forms of social imaginary that have underpinned the rise of Western modernity,” leading to his argument that “central to Western modernity is a new conception of the moral order of society” (2). As in previous works, Taylor stresses the importance of the historical roots of modernity. Again, he marks a distinct break between pre-modernity and modernity, in the context of how social and moral order is conceived. He traces to Grotius the idea of natural rights preceding (and thus informing) society: “The underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other, even prior to or outside the political bond” (4). This, argues Taylor, reflects the idea that had become predominant: that society exists “for the (mutual) benefit of individuals and the defense of their rights” (4). This theory moved from a “hermeneutic of legitimation” of established governments to a politically prescriptive one, manifested in demands for revolutionary change (7). Thus, according to Taylor, the idea of modern order becomes a *social imaginary,* descending from natural law theory.

The pre-modern notion of order and Law was conceived of significantly differently. In the pre-modern perspective, the moral order is “more than just a set of norms; it also contains what we might call an ‘ontic’ component, identifying features of the world that make the norms realizable” (10). There is a hierarchized cosmic order. By contrast, in the “modern idealization of order,” the “distribution of functions a society might develop is deemed contingent; it will be

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\(^8\)Taylor defines a “social imaginary” as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (23). He distinguishes this from social *theory.*
justified or not instrumentally; it cannot itself define the good” (12). The starting point, in modernity, is the individual, rather than the hierarchical order; society is functional. We associate for mutual benefit, security and prosperity, based on the needs of ordinary life (13).

This is not, however, in Taylor’s view accurately characterizable as “the rise of ‘individualism’ at the expense of ‘community’” (17). We must remember that “modernity is also the rise of new principles of sociality” (18). Nonetheless, individual freedom “itself becomes the basis for a new definition of virtue, and an order of true mutual benefit becomes inseparable from one that secures the virtue of self-dependence,” following the line of Rousseau and those in his vein (20). Again, this is bound to the defence of individuals’ rights.

Taylor offers his analysis in a nutshell: “Summing up, we can say that (1) the order of mutual benefit holds between individuals (or at least moral agents who are independent of larger hierarchical orders); (2) the benefits crucially include life and the means to life, although securing these relates to the practice of virtue; and (3) the order is meant to secure freedom and easily finds expression in terms of rights” (21). He then adds a fourth point: “These rights, this freedom, this mutual benefit is to be secured by all participants equally. Exactly what is meant by equality will vary, but that it must be affirmed in some form follows from the rejection of hierarchical order” (22). Taylor moves his analysis to the biggest shifts in our social imaginary brought about by our modern understanding of order, including conceptions of the economy, the public sphere, and popular sovereignty (democratic self-rule). Each represents a transformation of the social imaginary, and all are based on freedom and individual agency (69).

All of these shifts, Taylor emphasizes, include breaking away from a transcendent order: “The modern social imaginary no longer sees the greater translocal entities as grounded in
something other, something higher, than common action in secular time” (155). He identifies the American Revolution as the “watershed” of this transition in the social imaginary; it started as “backward-looking,” in that the goal was to re-establish ancient and legitimate order, but ended with “We, the people,” its whole new understanding of a free ‘people’ or ‘nation’ that can “exist prior to and independently of its political constitution” (156). This was a new conception of direct-access society via citizenship, one that was egalitarian (in principle at least) and horizontal (i.e., simultaneous, co-existing events in historical, secular time).

What is important for our purposes here is Taylor’s stress on the ‘flip side’ of modern individualism, one that need not result in atomism. “Modern individualism,” he says, “as a moral idea, doesn’t mean ceasing to belong at all – that’s the individualism of anomie and breakdown – but imagining oneself as belonging to ever wider and more impersonal entities: the state, the movement, the community of humankind” (160). This obviously has resonance in the context of environmentalism, where individuals generally count themselves as part of a movement. City life in particular is characterized by our sharing and occupying common space in modernity as individuals: “A host of urban nomads hover on the boundary between solipsism and communication” (168).

Thus our modes of social imaginary (in the West) have been shaped “in one way or another by the modern ideal of order as mutual benefit” (185), which includes a sense of egalitarianism and the upholding of individual rights. This is a radical breaking-free from older notions of ‘higher’ time and a hierarchical order. We are fully immersed in this modern moral framework: “It constitutes a horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond” (185). Importantly, Taylor notes that a social imaginary can be false or distorting, in the way of the
Marxist idea of ideology, though it can never be fully false. The door is again open for change, whereby our social imaginary can be broadened or altered to be more inclusive, from an environmental perspective, of non-human nature.

**Similar analyses, different conclusions**

Before turning to a closer look at how this analysis relates to environmental ethics, I should clarify, if briefly, the differences in thought between MacIntyre and Taylor. Though I have been for the most part emphasizing their similarities, particularly their common critique of procedural or emotivist modes of thought, I do not wish to falsely elide their differences or conflate their arguments. As we saw in Taylor’s review of *After Virtue*, his praise for MacIntyre’s insightful critique of the state of moral frameworks in modernity is counterbalanced by a disagreement with MacIntyre’s unequivocal turning from such frameworks. Both are Christian – Roman Catholic, in fact – and see much virtue in traditional ethical frameworks. Taylor, however, is a modern, or a more openly committed one, in that he believes modern ethical frameworks to be worthy and redeemable. MacIntyre rejects the various branches of the Enlightenment project that turned away from Aristotle; as we have seen, he calls for a return to the classics (and more specifically to Aristotle’s Christian incarnation in Aquinas).

This is a significant divergence. My aim is not to conclusively prove one or the other correct, but to draw insight from both; I must acknowledge in doing so that their theories do not fit so neatly together as I may at times present them. Ultimately, I cannot escape some positioning on the matter; I believe that MacIntyre’s critique is invaluable – and largely shared by Taylor – but that Taylor’s conclusions about modernity are perhaps more realistic. I do not see
all forms of post-Enlightenment ethics as hopeless, though I do see them as extremely problematic as they are (for the most part) presently articulated. I see in environmental ethics – for better or for worse, modern phenomena – the potential to recapture an Aristotelian sense of pursuit of the good(s) and human telos, while not abandoning the modern ideal of authenticity so clearly laid out by Taylor. In the end, as I have mentioned, and as Taylor accepts, we have no choice: we are inescapably modern. A puerile observation perhaps, but this fact does not entail a dissolution or destruction of some kind of our inherently ethical nature. We continue to create meaning- and efficacy-structures, as Segundo shows; we continue to make strong evaluations, as Taylor shows. The question is what we value, which begins with an acknowledgment of the structure and nature of our ethics.

There is much in common between the analyses of MacIntyre and Taylor, and many ways one can build from the other, which is why I have grouped them together here. The order they are presented in, nonetheless, is deliberate; as I have mentioned, I believe Taylor’s thought to be more nuanced. In the end, however, neither sufficiently confronts the reality of technique; that further step is the task of the next chapter. Before moving there, however, I must conclude my examination of the authors at hand.

Relating environmental ethics

After a fairly extensive look at both MacIntyre and Taylor’s conceptualizations and analysis of modern moral philosophy and the general moral frameworks of modernity, I would now like to take a closer look at how their points relate specifically to an understanding of environmental ethics. I will attempt to tie together my sporadic comments in this regard in the
chapter thus far, and help set the stage for my final analysis and conclusions.

My purpose in this chapter, as stated in the beginning, has been to examine the historical context of modern morality, using MacIntyre and Taylor’s theories; this has turned out to be a fairly complex picture. Both authors, particularly MacIntyre, acknowledge the confused state of modern morality. For MacIntyre this is evident in the interminable nature of contemporary moral debate. Certainly, much of the environmental debate seems likewise polarized; one need only think of proponents for and against the mandates of the Kyoto Protocol, for example.

Linked to this, according to MacIntyre, is the Enlightenment holdover notion that there exist neutral and objective criteria by which to judge the truth of all positions. This compounds the problem by ignoring (and in fact outright denying) the historically contextual notions of justice and rationality out of which our moral language develops. According to MacIntyre (and echoed by Taylor), what is primarily lost in modern morality, rendering it incoherent, is a sense of Aristotelian teleology.

What results, for MacIntyre, is the predominance of the moral philosophy of emotivism, the idea that all evaluative judgments are merely expressions of emotions or preferences. This, of course, confirms the incoherence; while we retain the (false) Enlightenment notion of there being rational justification for a universal conception of morality unified around one major principle, emotivism denies all possibility of securing agreement in moral judgment, since it is all a matter of preference. With the arbitrariness of moral language in modernity, in many cases it is in fact a matter of preference; the crucial error of emotivism, at least according to MacIntyre, is to understand this as universally true, the very nature of morality. Taylor also rejects this "naturalist" understanding of morality, convincingly arguing against it through his explanation of
evaluative language, particularly the notion of *strong evaluation*.

Obviously, the emotivist/naturalist understanding of morality has a serious impact on ethical interaction. We have seen MacIntyre’s point about the obliteration of the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations that emotivism entails. Moral discourse becomes, in many ways, a question of *rhetoric*; how persuasively one can make one’s case in order to sway the listener. This is certainly not absent in the environmental movement. My own experience with the SCC confirms a common concern of the Chapter’s executive committee is with *means*; how one ‘markets’ the message, what issues are likely to resonate with the public, etc. Much of the Chapter Director’s job (in addition to identifying ‘hot button’ issues that are more likely to receive funding) involves responding to media queries on environmental topics; this, of course, means taking a specific stance, usually in reaction to a government position. It is easy to see the prevalence of manipulative discourse here; or, at the very least, the lack of distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative discourse. Moral interaction, in large measure at least, is about convincing others they should *feel* a certain way.⁹

Environmentalists are certainly not entirely outside this mode of discourse, but it presents a disadvantage to them, because there is more at stake, morally. There is a definite sense of right and wrong, good and bad, among most environmentalists (certainly those I spoke and interacted with). The underlying straightforward principle is that any action that harms the earth is bad. When moral discourse, then, based on an emotivist understanding, is merely a question of manipulating feelings, how does one argue for what is ultimately *right* or (more appropriately)

⁹As I will suggest, however, this is nonetheless within a broader concept of human *telos* linked to the good – in this case, specifically the larger goal of environmental sustainability.
The extreme relativism of an emotivist moral philosophy impoverishes positions of social justice, because there is no outside standard on which to rely; what is left is an appeal to a sense of empathy. While this can certainly garner some success, it is a philosophically precarious position; it can be countered simply, for example, by the argument that we have anthropomorphized nature and thus allowed our feelings of empathy to cloud sound rational judgment about acceptable exploitation of the earth’s resources for our benefit. If we simply *feel* that environmental exploitation is wrong (or that poverty is unacceptable, or that racism is bad, etc.), by what measure is this position ‘correct’ over another, other than by right of more successful manipulation of others’ feelings?

Because of the deemed futility of moral discourse – remembering that the archetypal social characters, according to MacIntyre, the Manager and the Therapist, neither “do or are able to engage in moral debate” – it is more often than not pushed to the periphery. Environmentalism, like other social justice causes, becomes a ‘project’ taken on by certain individuals, categorized as another ‘special interest group.’ Obviously, it is not quite so simple as this, and one might reasonably assume that environmentalism is at least a part of the consciousness of most people in the West (or at least, specifically, most Canadians). One wonders, however, how much moral discourse seriously takes place in offices, research labs, and social institutions where policies (including environmental ones) are created and enforced in *quantitative* (often monetary) terms, and science and technology is driven forward. Moral *neutrality* is in fact what is striven for.

There is, in fact, as I have alluded to, a ‘double layer’ of difficulties with regard to engaging in moral discourse (specifically environmental). Morality is understood as feelings, entirely personal, given the emotivist understanding; hence the model is of value- or moral-
neutrality. But, as we have seen, this itself cloaks a very definite kind of morality itself, one that exalts mechanism and instrumentality, the championing of *means*. This also, as we saw with MacIntyre, relates to epistemology, in what is considered *truth* and *fact* (divorced from ‘ought’).

Taylor provides a glimpse of the moral frameworks that operate in modernity (and are very much active, despite claims to moral-neutrality). In particular, his emphasis on the affirmation of ordinary life and the ethic of authenticity provide important characterizations of modern morality. The mechanistic understanding of the world, and the suspicion of ‘higher’ goods and moral contemplation in general, are two prominent features of these modern moral frameworks. Again, it becomes difficult to articulate and argue for an environmental ethic, which has an avowed vision of the good and is often explicitly anti-mechanistic.\(^\text{10}\)

This, then, is the double-bind for environmentalists; trying to engage in a culture/society where the predominant moral framework is the *denial* of moral frameworks in the key functions of society, or at least the denial of their importance (they are ‘merely’ personal feelings, best left to the ‘private sphere’). Any challenge to this is trumped by the emotivist perspective that it is all a matter of opinion; environmentalists are, after all, welcome to their opinions.\(^\text{11}\)

The other major issue, of course, in challenging dominant paradigms is the perceived threat to freedom. This is something to which I will return in detail in the Conclusion, after examining the role of the individual.

\(^\text{10}\)See, for example, the work of Carolyn Merchant, particularly *The Death of Nature* (1990).

\(^\text{11}\)I must be cautious here, and above, not to gloss over genuine attempts in policy-making to incorporate agreed-upon standards of environmental ethics; however, I believe this speaks more to the political weight increasingly shared public *opinion* carries rather than an express commitment to a higher notion of the good (in many cases, at least). This is a difficult issue to untangle, largely because of the relationship between the *individual* and the bureaucratic, technological *state*; I will explore this in more detail in later chapters.
Before doing so, however, there remains a larger challenge to understanding what it means to be environmentally ethical (or spiritual) in modernity. All of what has been discussed so far, it seems to me, must be considered in light of the overarching reality – indeed, the ontology – of technological society (or, as Ellul says, of *technique*). Thus, before carrying forward my conclusion, I now turn to a detailed analysis of technological society (Chapter Four), and how the theories of Segundo, Taylor and MacIntyre must be understood in this light (Chapter Five).
Chapter 4  
The Nature of Technique: Ellul

So we do have [technological] capacities. But then, as humans, who have ethics and spirituality, we have to think how are we going to do these things, how do we... . Just - just for the sake of, woah, how brilliant we can be, just keep on doing things . . . That doesn’t make sense.

-Saleema, SCC member

After examining theories on the foundation of human meaning-systems and ethics from the philosophical standpoints of Segundo, MacIntyre, and Taylor, I would now like to change theoretical lenses to some degree in examining the nature of environmental ethics in modernity. As many authors1 have argued over the past fifty years (and more), an understanding of any aspect of modern civilization is impossible without considering technology. Indeed, many have said that technology is the central phenomenon of modern society. Jacques Ellul in particular is relentless in his critique of technological society, working throughout his life to expose the true nature of technique, its permeation of all facets of society, and to issue a prophetic warning about the consequences. Following Ellul, I contend that no study of any aspect of modern society is complete without a serious consideration of the technological context; technique is the “milieu” of the modern age (Ellul 2004, 47).

In this chapter, I will examine Ellul’s analysis (and critique) of technique in detail. This process is more than simply setting the context for further discussion of ethics, spirituality, and environmentalism; it is an exercise in sociological analysis that aims to ‘fill out’ the philosophical, anthropological and theological analyses examined in previous chapters. Though each discipline tends to understand itself as more or less comprehensive, I believe Ellul’s analysis to be the most

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1The list is too long to cite; pioneers include Lewis Mumford, Martin Heidegger, Jean Fourastié, Georges Friedmann, Aldous Huxley, and, of course, Jacques Ellul.
though, completing, in a sense, the picture that the authors previously examined begin to paint of ethics and spirituality (and, indeed, environmentalism) in modern Western society (regardless of the chronology of their writing). As such, I believe it crucial to accurately present Ellul’s argument on technique, which will be my task through the bulk of this chapter, before turning to more interpretive work. I will conclude this chapter with a brief look at how he understands environmental issues (relating directly to his understanding of technique).

Ellul was a truly prolific writer, publishing over fifty books as well as countless articles. As such, my treatment of his work here will obviously be far from comprehensive. I wish to summarize and explain the main thrust of his argument, with some detail about the nature of technique, rather than supply every argument he makes for every sub-area affected by technique. Though I acknowledge the point that “if any aspect of Ellul’s thought is to be seriously examined and properly interpreted, it must be set within the context of the whole Ellul corpus” (Goddard 2002, 52), and Ellul’s own point that “I have not actually written a wide variety of books but rather one long book in which each ‘individual book’ constitutes a chapter” (cited in Goddard 2002, 52), the sheer impossibility of presenting the entirety of his thought leads me to risk the hubris of summarizing key strands of argument I believe to be relevant to my own project.

Ellul’s work, he himself emphasizes, falls into two ‘streams’: theological/ethical, and historical/sociological (Ellul refuses to consider himself a philosopher). The former stems from

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2 For the general background information on Ellul’s thought in what follows, I rely significantly on Andrew Goddard’s monograph of Ellul: Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul (2002). Ellul himself offers detailed biographical information in many of his interviews, and in particular in the first chapter of the volume Perspectives On Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks On His Life and Work (2004), edited by Willem Vanderburg.

3 He devoted entire books, for example, to such subjects as propaganda, revolutions, and modern art.
his strong Christian faith (from his own stance as a member of the Reformed Church of France), and the latter largely from the influence of Marx; the two generally incompatible influences led him to follow the two separate trajectories. As Ellul admits: “I . . . remained unable to eliminate Marx, unable to eliminate the biblical revelation, and unable to merge the two. For me, it was impossible to put them together. So I began to be torn between the two, and I have remained so all my life. The development of my thinking can be explained starting with this contradiction” (1982, 16).

This at least in part justifies focussing on one stream or the other, and indeed here I will restrict myself mainly to his sociological analyses⁴; however, his faith in biblical revelation and his trust in a loving God are crucial (if unstated in his sociological texts) foils to his critiques of technological society, and they relate to his environmental activism in particular, as we shall see. Understanding the exact relationship between his two streams of thought is a particular challenge, beyond the scope of this work. Goddard’s note, though, is important:

Ellul’s sociological studies are clearly an examination of what theologically is the world of ruptured communion. They are, however, focussed on the intermediate level of a given society’s determining structures and Ellul’s central claim is that these structures make the modern world qualitatively different from earlier periods of history. (2002, 155)

Thus, though “his theological dialectic of communion and rupture in the historic relationship between God and the world is derived from revelation” (161), revelation “cannot, however, provide either a sociological method or comprehension of any particular society’s structures and evolution” (162). Ellul’s wider understanding of history is premised on a larger, theological

⁴Ellul explicitly includes discussions of ethics in his theological work; these will be for the most part eschewed in favour of his sociological work, for the former is, a Goddard states, “addressed primarily to Christians and cannot be universalised and applied to those without faith” (2002, 57).
dialectic; as Goddard points out, however, he can still comfortably isolate specifically his study of the intermediate level of society (where modern technique dominates).

In understanding the broader picture of Ellul’s work, we more clearly see his dialectical view of history, propelled by change (particularly conflict and tension). Goddard adds:

Ellul’s sociological studies of the contemporary world must be viewed from this wider historical perspective and are therefore misunderstood if not properly set in relation both to Ellul’s radical programme for the future, and his historian’s perspective on the past and the historical progress.

Once his sociological studies are set in this wider historical context it is then essential to grasp that Ellul follows Hegel and particularly Marx in viewing dialectical processes as fundamental to life and history. (118)

This is indeed a key part of his theoretical background. In his early days Ellul was involved in small revolutionary groups in France, which might be described as anarchist or ‘Christian anarchist’; Ellul generally identifies them as part of the personalist movement. Until shortly after the Second World War, he and his friends believed that a revolutionary change in society was possible and indeed imminent. As he describes in several interviews, he was bitterly disappointed when this did not occur; a kind of stagnation in the dialectical process that he came to associate directly with the homogenization of technique. Thereafter, the dialectical process oscillated for him between the despair-inducing forces of technique, and the hope-giving revelations in the Bible. Though in some ways these forces are contradictory, this, to Ellul, is the nature of a dialectical understanding: “I would say very simply that, at bottom, dialectics is a procedure that does not exclude contraries, but includes them” (2004, 6).

Ellul’s methodology is very straightforward, as he wished it to remain. He thoroughly

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5See, for example, Perspectives on Our Age, p. 15, for Ellul’s description of the personalist movement.
examine nearly all facets of society, providing countless contemporary examples, and analyzes them within the broader framework of technique. He is scrupulously factual in his observations, which he continually invites readers to challenge him on. And yet, he relies little on ‘objective’ statistics and hard, quantitative data. In direct contradistinction to technical means of gathering and presenting data, his sociology is very qualitative, as Goddard confirms: “Ellul’s fundamental method is . . . an avowedly non-technical and subjective one of reflection upon one’s own life (and that of one’s neighbours) in order to gain a global perspective on society and discern what lies at its heart” (2002, 121). This, no doubt, is the reason for his own emphasis on the rigour with which he ensures his observations are factual; it is also the basis of his distancing himself from philosophy, which he considers generally too abstract and removed from concrete reality (again demonstrating the influence of Marx).

With this background in mind, let us now turn to a specific examination of Ellul’s analysis of technique. Ellul’s thought on technique traces to a 1935 manifesto written with his friend and mentor Bernard Charbonneau, entitled “Directives pour un manifeste personaliste” (Goddard

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6 He states in his Foreword to the Revised American Edition of The Technological Society (1964): “I ask only that the reader place himself on the factual level and address himself to these questions: ‘Are the facts analyzed here false?’ ‘Is the analysis inaccurate?’ ‘Are the conclusions unwarranted?’ ‘Are there substantial gaps and omissions?’” (xxviii).

7 The terms ‘technique’ and ‘technology’ are somewhat controversial and potentially confusing when discussing Ellul’s work. He himself explicitly preferred the word technique (French and English), despite the fact that it has sometimes been translated into English as technology, because that was deemed to be the more common usage. Ellul states in the preface to The Technological Bluff (1990): “American usage has implanted in our minds the idea that the word technology refers to actual processes. This is the way the media use the term. But in a strict sense technology is discourse on technique. It involves the study of a technique, a philosophy or sociology of technique, instruction in a technique” (xv). See also Perspectives On Our Age, pp. 26-27. George Grant, reacting to this, defends the use of the term ‘technology’ (see “Thinking About Technology” in his Technology and Justice, and p. 141 of George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations, ed. Larry Schmidt). I will generally make use of both terms, as the case warrants, to minimize awkwardness; context, I hope, will clarify usage and avoid confusion.
During his years with the personalist movement, in which he and Charbonneau were involved with the groups *Esprit* and *Ordre Nouveau*, they wrote several articles on technique, and the general ‘technicizing’ of society. It was not until the 1954 publication of *La technique ou l’enjeu du siècle*, translated in 1964 as *The Technological Society*, that Ellul’s thoughts on technique received full and comprehensive treatment. This was followed in later years by two more books specifically on technique: *The Technological System* (1980) and *The Technological Bluff* (1990). I will look at each in turn, focussing mostly on the first, where the core ideas can be found, and indeed remain intact through the later works. Though it was in fact now written over fifty years ago, the ideas in *Society* have only become more relevant, leading many to refer to Ellul genuinely as a prophet. As Goddard writes: “Faced as we are today with such diverse challenges as legal regulation in more and more spheres of life, bureaucratisation in education, developments in assisted reproduction and genetic engineering, and the power of mass media and political spin-doctors, Ellul enables us to get below the specific, surface issue and see the bigger picture” (Goddard 2002, 308).

In his Foreword to the 1964 translation, Robert Merton says of *The Technological Society* that it “requires us to examine anew what the author describes as the essential tragedy of a civilization dominated by technique” (v). The word ‘tragedy’ is not chosen lightly, though it is perhaps applied too early at this stage of Ellul’s writing. Ellul in his sociological works frequently

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8 It is important to note that Ellul, in every interview where the subject is raised, gives credit to Charbonneau for originally alerting him to the phenomenon of technique, despite the fact that Ellul became much more widely published and recognized in this field.

9 I will refer to these three works respectively as *Society*, *System*, and *Bluff*.

10 He says in the foreword to *Bluff*: “With no false modesty I can say that social, economic and technical developments have confirmed in its entirety what I said thirty years ago [in *Society*]” (xii).
It is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on Ellul’s analysis of technique in particular; not only is it the most penetrating and insightful, but I expressly agree with his critical stance. He mentions that he concerned only with assessment of fact, and that he is not a prophet of doom, nor gloomily despairing of the failure of society. In his Foreword to the Revised American Edition of *Society*, he states: “I am neither by nature, nor doctrinally, a pessimist, nor have I pessimistic prejudices. I am concerned only with knowing whether things are so or not” (xxvii). He states, however, that the book is a warning, and its purpose is “to arouse the reader to an awareness of the technological necessity and what it means. It is a call to the sleeper to wake” (xxiii). This warning, however, can be only partially described as a straightforward account of facts; permeating this and his other work is a harsh critique of our technical society. The line between statements of fact and judgment is very faint indeed in *Society* and subsequent books; but it is not until later works, in which he realizes his warnings have been ignored, that his descriptions are that of a tragedy. In any case, we must bear in mind that underscoring Ellul’s analysis is an increasingly (particularly in later years) explicit condemnation of the technical evolution of modern society, despite his claims to the contrary.¹¹

**The notion of technique**

The most essential beginning point of any exploration of *Society* is to understand exactly what Ellul means by *technique*. Merton puts forth his understanding of this key concept: “By *technique* . . . [Ellul] means far more than machine technology. Technique refers to any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result. Thus, it converts spontaneous and unreflective behaviour into behaviour that is deliberate and rationalized” (1964, vi). The

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¹¹It is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on Ellul’s analysis of technique in particular; not only is it the most penetrating and insightful, but I expressly agree with his critical stance.
“Technical Man,” he says, is above all “committed to the never-ending search for ‘the one best way’ to achieve any designated objective” (vi). Ellul himself confirms this in his “Note to the Reader”: “The term technique, as I use it, does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity” (1964, xxv). The machine is only one aspect of technique; technique “integrates the machine into society” (5). Giving perhaps the most straightforward definition, Ellul says that “in fact, technique is nothing more than the means and the ensemble of means” (19).12

The predominance of technique in modern day-to-day activities is why ours is a technical society or civilization. Again, quoting Merton:

... by this Ellul means that the ever-expanding and irreversible rule of technique is extended to all domains of life. It is a civilization committed to the quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends. Indeed, technique transforms ends into means. What was once prized in its own right now becomes worthwhile only if it helps achieve something else. And, conversely, technique turns means into ends. “Know-how” takes on an ultimate value. (1964, vi)

Technique, in this sense, has become deterministic. Though there have been other determinisms in the past, technical civilization is the unique determinism of modernity.

Ellul looks at the historical development of technique in the West, which I will mention briefly here in light of the historical evolution of moral philosophy examined in the previous chapter. He notes that the early to middle Christian period (10th-14th centuries) in the West is characterized by a distinct lack of technical will (1964, 34). The period that followed was

12There is an obvious comparison to be made here between Ellul’s technique and Segundo’s ideology, which I will come to in the next chapter.
dominated by Renaissance humanism, with its belief “not only in knowledge and respect for the human being but in genuine supremacy of man over means” (41). This universalist idea, says Ellul, stifled technique. From the early 18th century onwards, however, the primacy of means of control over nature led to the increasing emphasis on technique, culminating in what might be considered the true ushering in of technical civilization: the Industrial Revolution. Referring specifically to this, Ellul states: “From this point of view, it might be said that technique is the translation into action of man’s concern to master things by means of reason, to account for what is subconscious, make quantitative what is qualitative, make clear and precise the outlines of nature, take hold of chaos and put order into it” (43). Expanding on Ellul’s distinction between pre- and post- 18th-century technique, Willem Vanderburg states:

The methods employed [in the technological system] are no longer arrived at on the basis of experience and culture being handed down from generation to generation as accumulated experience turns into a collective wisdom designed for living. The new methods are instead arrived at rationally, that is, by ratio (i.e., efficiency) rather than by context. Furthermore, these new methods are not concerned first and foremost with human needs, desires, or aspirations – or, for that matter, with human values of any kind. It is now a question of the methods having the greatest possible efficiency, calculated as the ratio of desired outputs and requisite inputs, without any reference to their meaning and value for human life. (2004a, 92-93)

This impulse, of course, accelerated into the 20th and 21st centuries, and continues to be the dominant discourse, which is what originally prompted an alarmed Ellul to respond to.13

13 Again, clearly, there is a link between the development of technique and its dominance in society to a changing moral philosophy that saw the elimination of any notion of Aristotelian teleology. Again, I will come back to examine this in more detail in the next chapter.
The technical phenomenon

In making a qualitative distinction between forms of technique before and after the 18th century and the Industrial Revolution (roughly), Ellul distinguishes the technical operation from the technical phenomenon.\(^{14}\) The former is more basic: methods used to achieve ends. It “includes every operation carried out in accordance with a certain method in order to attain a particular end” (Ellul 1964, 19). Technical operation is an inherently human activity, and not unique to any specific time period. What Ellul calls the technical phenomenon, however, is the intervention upon technical operation of consciousness and judgment (20). This double intervention, he says, “takes what was previously tentative, unconscious, and spontaneous and brings it into the realm of clear, voluntary, and reasoned concepts” (20). He explains this potentially confusing distinction by way of an example:

When André Leroi-Gourhan tabulates the efficiency of Zulu swords and arrows in terms of the most up-to-date knowledge of weaponry, he is doing work that is obviously different from that of the swordsmith of Bechuanaland who created the form of the sword. The swordsmith’s choice of form was unconscious and spontaneous; although it can now be justified by numerical calculations, such calculations had no place whatever in the technical operation he performed. (20)

Rational judgment changes spontaneous and instinctual technical operations into a more precise procedure: reason “notes what every means devised is capable of accomplishing and selects from the various means at its disposal with a view to securing the ones that are the most efficient, the best adapted to the desired end. Thus the multiplicity of means is reduced to one: the most efficient” (21). Then, Ellul says, there is the addition of consciousness, which “shows clearly, and to everybody, the advantages of technique and what it can accomplish”; this results in a “rapid and

\(^{14}\) For a further elaboration of what follows on the distinction between practical technique and the technical phenomenon, see Perspectives on Our Age, pp. 29-30.
far-flung extension of technique” (21).

The intervention of reason (rational judgment) and consciousness thus produces the technical phenomenon. Ellul describes this essentially as “the quest of the one best means in every field,” which is, in fact, “the technical means” (21). This means going beyond the relative best means: “It is really a question of finding the best means in the absolute sense, on the basis of numerical calculation” (21). And, he says, “it is the aggregate of these means that produces technical civilization” (21). Numerical calculation, of course, involves the suppression of the qualitative in favour of the quantitative. As John Wilkinson states: “It is, in fact, the essence of technique to compel the qualitative to become the quantitative, and in this way to force every stage of human activity and man himself to submit to its mathematical calculations” (1964, xvi). Behind this is the pervasive emphasis on efficiency. This is everywhere and in all cases the primary consideration. States Ellul: “Technical progress today is no longer conditioned by anything other than its own calculus of efficiency. The search is no longer personal, experimental, workmanlike; it is abstract, mathematical, and industrial” (1964, 74).

The two “obvious” characteristics of the technical phenomenon, according to Ellul, are rationality and artificiality (79). In addition to this, however, there exist characteristics that are less obvious. He devotes a large portion of Society to examining each of them in turn: automatism, self-augmentation, monism, universalism, and autonomy. Naturally, these aspects all interrelate. As these comprise the core substance of his understanding and explanation of technique, I will briefly examine these characteristics, drawing also on his elaboration on these
characteristics in his later work *System.*

Ellul describes the process of technical *automatism* as such:

When everything has been measured and calculated mathematically so that the method which has been decided upon is satisfactory from the rational point of view, and when, from the practical point of view, the method is manifestly the most efficient of all those hitherto employed or those in competition with it, then the technical movement has become self-directing. (80)

In other words, the element of personal choice has been completely removed (despite any illusions of such that might remain). “Technique itself,” he continues, “*ipso facto* and without indulgence or possible discussion, selects among the means to be employed. The human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice” (80).

This is the first aspect of automatism; the second aspect is that “technical activity automatically eliminates every nontechnical activity or transforms it into technical activity” (83). This is not, as Ellul emphasizes in *System*, not like machine automation; rather, “the system’s automatism is the application of technologies according to choices that are induced by previous technologies and that can be shunted and diverted only with great difficulty” (1980b, 232).

The characteristic of *self-augmentation*, too, has two aspects, according to Ellul. The first is that technique advances from the collective will to technique by all people in their separate spheres, in every profession. “Technical progress,” says Ellul, “and common human effort come to the same thing” (1964, 85). What gives the technical phenomenon *self-augmentation*,

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16 This book, and Ellul’s revisions of his own ideas since *Society*, will be examined in more detail further on. As I will discuss, Ellul speaks of technique as a *system* in the later work, but the technical *phenomenon* as such is a consistent idea in his work, and thus his descriptions in both works of the characteristics do not contradict each other but in fact build upon each other (Ellul mentions in *System* on more than one occasion that he is simply adding to the account first given in *Society*).

17 See footnote 7 on the usage of the terms ‘technique’ and ‘technology.’
however, is the second aspect: namely, the “automatic growth (that is, growth which is not calculated, desired, or chosen) of everything which concerns technique” (87). Put another way: “When a new technical form appears, it makes possible and conditions a number of others” (87). This creates a momentum that feeds and builds on itself. Ellul states that self-augmentation can be formulated in two laws: “In a given civilization, technical progress is irreversible”; and “Technical progress tends to act, not according to an arithmetic, but according to a geometric progression” (89). He adds in System that “everything occurs as if the technological system were growing by an internal, intrinsic force, without decisive human intervention” (1980b, 209).

A final point raised by Ellul concerning the characteristic of self-augmentation is that “technique, in its development, poses primarily technical problems which consequently can be resolved only by technique” (1964, 92). Technique necessarily engenders further technique. Technical discourse becomes the exclusive one, thus ensuring self-perpetuation.

The characteristic of monism, according to Ellul, relates to the fact that parts of the technical phenomenon are “ontologically bound together; in it, use is inseparable from being” (95). The emphasis here is on the interrelatedness of technique. One form of technique always spawns other forms of technique in other spheres of life (clearly, this is related to self-augmentation). In his brief account of the interdependent development of different kinds of technique (originally commercial, industrial, and transportational; later, in big cities, planning and organizational, entertainment, and labour), Ellul demonstrates that this mutual interaction became a whole system, such that “it is impossible to amputate a part of the system or to modify it in any way without modifying the whole” (116). Hence the monistic quality of the technical

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18 The term unicité in French.
phenomenon. In addition, there is *moral* monism: “The technical phenomenon cannot be broken down in such a way as to retain the good and reject the bad. It has a ‘mass’ which renders it monistic” (111).

*Universalism* as a characteristic of technique, says Ellul, again has two aspects: geographic and qualitative (116). The technical phenomenon is truly universal, impacting all corners of the globe in the same way. As Ellul states: “ Technique is the same in all latitudes and hence acts to make different civilizations uniform” (117). This results in the erosion and destruction of indigenous cultural forms, including religion. In recognizing this and in particular the impact of the geographical universality of technique on the Third World, he echoes much of what E.F. Schumacher argues in his classic 1973 work *Small is Beautiful*. Ellul says in *System*:

Goldsmith vividly points out that little by little we are forcing the third-world nations (seemingly for their own good) to abandon their very sound farming methods, which respected the natural cycles. Instead, they are turning to an intensive agriculture with machines, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. This development has the twofold effect of making these nations more and more subordinate to the technological countries and plunging them in the vicious spiral of unlimited technicization. However, the immediate result is an improved situation for the consumption of agricultural products. Technicization always takes place in the name of an immediate obvious necessity. (183)

He diverges from Schumacher, however, in that he sees ‘appropriate technology’ (an idea Schumacher championed) as an extension of the technological system:

...the notion of “appropriate technology” signifies a technological adjustment to circumstances, which is quite “normal” in the technological phenomenon. And the limitation to economic effects and services considerably limits the interest of such research. The point each time is simply to determine how the technological system can be set up in developing countries. All that can be done is to figure out what is more profitable... what brings the least amount of trouble and upheaval. (191)\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\)In Schumacher’s defense, however, one must take issue with Ellul’s statement that “the weakness of... all present-day research on ‘appropriate technologies’ is that it still views the economic criterion as determinant,
Whether or not his assessment of appropriate technology is fair, Ellul rightly notes that any notion of ‘development’ can only exist because of technical universalism: “Once there is universality of a type, technology, in which everybody aligns himself on this structure and adopts its ideology, comparison becomes inevitable, and inequality sticks out like a sore thumb . . . The ‘problem’ of development has become a ‘problem’ because of the ideal of well-being and the general spread of technicization” (190).

All of this relates to the qualitative aspect of the universalism of technique; all facets of society have been subordinated to technique, including art and literature, and all other traditionally non-technical activities. As he says in System, technique has penetrated into even “the most remote areas, love and religion” (173). Love becomes a question of pleasure, usually physical, which in turn is technicized: “The sexual act detached from life (the life of the protagonists and those who could be born from it) is a mechanism” (174). Religious activities gaining in popularity, says Ellul, are those most radically technicized: “In the mental space of technological cultures, the highest philosophies deteriorate into recipes.’ It is always a matter of finding and exterior procedure, demanding the least effort (an eminently technological trait) to obtain the same apparent result (ecstasy via a drug, the expansion of spiritual space)” (174). He asks, “Why bother with the long asceticism of spiritual exercises, like Ignatius de Loyola, if a pill can give us the same result? Once again, here is the precise stamp of technology. Efficiency is prime – whereas an authentically religious person would say the opposite: Asceticism is prime” (175).

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20 Similar arguments have been made with regard to the idea of sustainable development. See, for example, Wolfgang Sachs’ Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development (1999).
Finally, in the *autonomy* of the technical phenomenon, Ellul refers to the closed, autonomous organization necessary for optimal efficiency in technical operations. He states that “the complete separation of the goal from the mechanism, the limitation of the problem to the means, and the refusal to interfere in any way with efficiency” are at the basis of technical autonomy (1964, 133). Technical autonomy is particularly apparent “in respect to morality and spiritual values”: “technique tolerates no judgment from without and accepts no limitation” (134). This is what is most deeply behind the belief in the value-neutrality of technique. As Ellul notes: “Morality judges moral problems; as far as technical problems are concerned, it has nothing to say. Only technical criteria are relevant” (134). Further, as he points out, morality is in fact becoming subordinate to technique, or even *equated* with it: “The power and autonomy of technique are so well secured that it, in its turn, has become the judge of what is moral, the creator of a new morality” (134). Things are no longer understood as “good or bad in themselves. Technique in itself is neither, and can therefore do what it will. It is truly autonomous” (134). I will return to these ideas later in a closer examination of ethics in the technical civilization.

These, then, are the principle characteristics of the technical phenomenon. After examining each of them closely, Ellul in *Society* looks at the main manifestations of technique in turn: the economy, the state, and humanity itself. With the first, for example, he discusses how economic progress and evolution – its measure of success – is inextricably tied to technical progress. Investment, for instance, requires a steady stream of new possibilities:

There is only one way to ensure limitless possibilities [of investment]. These possibilities have nothing to do with spontaneous human needs, but involve technical discovery and application, which create new products to replace the old,
The pace becomes ever-more frenetic with the exponential increase in goods, making Ellul’s observation all the more applicable fifty years later.

_Economic technique_ became all the more necessary with the proliferation of conflicting economic theories in the early- to mid-twentieth century. This has led to a highly specialized (and esoteric) group of economic technicians who deal with macroeconomic measurements and indicators wholly incomprehensible to the rest of the populace (162). Statistics are the primary technical instrument of this group (163). And statistical analysis, in order to be efficient (efficiency, as we have seen, being “the very law of technique”), leads to _application_ and _intervention_ in the form of economic planning (171). Economic technique, to Ellul, also best represents the ascendancy of the artificial: “It is in the realm of economic technique that we experience most clearly the great and dramatic process of modern times, in which both chance and natural laws are transformed into decisions of accountants, rules of planning, and decrees of the state” (216).

An important concept elaborated by Ellul is that of the “economic man,” who, as either a _bourgeois_ or a proletariat, is “only a machine for production and consumption. He is under obligation to produce. He is under the same obligation to consume. He must absorb what the economy offers him” (221). How much more true is the following paragraph for today’s reality than that during the time of Ellul’s writing:

_The counterpart of the necessary reduction of human life to working is its_
reduction to gorging. If man does not already have certain needs, they must be created. The important concern is not the psychic and mental structure of the human being but the uninterrupted flow of any and all goods which invention allows the economy to produce. Whence the measureless trituration of the human soul, the true issue of which is propaganda. And propaganda, reduced to advertising, relates happiness and a meaningful life to consumption. He who has money is a slave of the money he has. He who has it not is the slave of a mad desire to get it. The first and great law is consumption. Nothing but this imperative as any value in such a life. (221)

This critique seems almost commonplace now; it was certainly not at the time of Ellul’s writing. Further, he is linking it specifically to the technical phenomenon as it is manifested in economics. The transformation of humans into fully economic beings, for Ellul, reflects the triumph of technique over liberal capitalism (as well as communism), or the absorption of the latter into the former. Regulation and control is complete, such that it even includes moral and spiritual ‘freedom’:

When man himself becomes a machine, he attains to the marvellous freedom of unconsciousness, the freedom of the machine itself. A spiritual and moral life is required of him because the machine has need of such a life: no technique is possible with amoral and asocial men. Man feels himself to be responsible, but he is not. He does not feel himself an object, but he is . . . Thus, the development of economic techniques does not formally destroy the spiritual, but rather subordinates it to the realization of the Great Design. (226)

One might clarify Ellul’s explanation slightly by adding that the spiritual becomes an essentially private affair, thus giving the idea of complete personal choice, and the moral life becomes controlled insofar as the only ‘true’ morality is social morality (which, of course, is always in line with further technique), while personal differences are simply ‘preferences.’ We saw this when looking at MacIntyre and Taylor; I will return to this notion.

Economic technique requires the intervention of the state: “. . . either it receives from the state that sanction which alone can render it efficacious, or it must remain a mere abstraction, an
offer without a taker” (228). With its intervention, says Ellul, the state itself becomes technique (228). He outlines a number of other causes for the interrelation of technique and state, as well as the various particular techniques applied by the state: industrial and commercial, insurance and banking, organizational, psychological, artistic, scientific, planning, biological, and sociological (253). The mechanism of the state, says Ellul, is bigger than any individual politicians, even in the face of apparent ideological motives and differences (254). With a certain jaded irony, he adds that the “corruption of politicians is the only factor which can retard the total transformation of the state into a gigantic, exclusively technical apparatus” (262).

Self-interested politicians notwithstanding, Ellul stresses that “the structures of the modern state and its organs of government are subordinate to the techniques dependent on the state. If we were to consider in turn each of the indispensable services of the modern state, we would find that they are becoming more and more alike, regardless of the theories of government under which they operate” (271, emphasis in original). This is, in fact, one point which Ellul slightly misdiagnosed, which he acknowledges in System. Although he foresees in Society the gradual but complete conversion of the state to technique, which would utterly undermine democracy and make political differences illusory, this has not come to pass. The war on Iraq, for example, has been remarkably inefficient (and thus, in some sense, nontechnical); American troops remain there at least in part for ideological reasons (the importance of the appearance of total control, for instance). Ellul does make a sound point, however, in discussing the apparent presence of morality in decisions of the state; political decisions do need to be justified, he admits, and some appearance of scruples still exists in democratic states, but such scruples are “without force or reality. They are merely verbal smokescreens, and the democracies disregard them every
time it is necessary to do so” (288). Inevitably technique wins out, but a democratic state’s scruples “act as a drag on it, if not in the actual application of techniques (which would, in an case, be impossible), at least in its enterprise” (288).

Democracies, Ellul argues, in fact tend toward totalitarianism, because this is the most efficient technical state. The suspension of democratic processes during war, he notes, allows for “a prodigious advance in the use of certain techniques” (289).

Whether or not one agrees with Ellul’s specific analysis of democracy and the illusion of political freedom, once cannot deny his point that the state does function largely through technical mechanisms, meaning that the state as agent of social change (for example, in environmental issues) is severely hampered.

Of the three manifestations of technique Ellul discusses, it is the third, human technique, that is perhaps most relevant to the present work. As we saw with the description of the “economic man,” despite the promise of salvation from work, technique has in fact increased it:

Never before has the human race as a whole had to exert such efforts into its daily labors as it does today as a result of its absorption into the monstrous technical mechanism – an undifferentiated but complex mechanism which makes it impossible to turn a wheel without the sustained, preserving, and intensive labor of millions of workers, whether in white collars or in blue. (319)

22 A potential weakness of Ellul’s account here is that he makes no mention of other potential causes of totalitarianism, including the notion of the will-to-power, which is quite different from the state’s tendency toward technical efficiency.

23 In another instance of prophetic wisdom, Ellul further notes that “there are always wars of one kind or another: war preparations, cold war, hot war, new cold war, and so on, ad infinitum” (289). The ‘war on terror’ can certainly be added to this list.

24 Not only this, but the work is often degrading and meaningless. Again, this point is taken up by Schumacher in Small is Beautiful, in discussing the human substance of our “natural capital” (see Chapter 1 in particular).
Ellul challenges the uncritical embracing of technique-driven increases in creature comforts that are dubbed ‘humanist,’ concerned as they are with the “human situation”: “Unfortunately, it is a historical fact that this shouting of humanism always comes after the technicians have intervened; for a true humanism, it ought to have occurred before” (339). Philosophical applauding of such humanism is in fact simply rationalization (339).

Such a rationalization also occurs with respect to nature. In one of his few explicit references to environmental issues in *Society*, Ellul gives the example of agricultural technique:

In the United States, for example, methods of large-scale agriculture had been savagely applied. The humanists became alarmed by this violation of sacred soil, this lack of respect for nature; but the technical people troubled themselves not at all until a steady decline in agricultural productivity became apparent. Technical research discovered that the earth contains certain trace elements which become exhausted when the soil is mistreated. This discovery led to the conclusion that animal and vegetable (“organic”) fertilizers were superior to any and all artificial fertilizers, and that it is essential not to exhaust the earth’s reserves. Up to now no one had succeeded in finding a way of replacing the trace elements artificially. The technicians have recommended more care in the use of fertilizers and moderation in the utilization of machinery; in short, “respect” for the soil. And all nature lovers rejoice. But was any real respect for the earth involved here? Clearly not. The important thing was agricultural yield. (339-340)

Thus, even apparent humanist (or, updating Ellul’s terms, environmentalist) concerns and victories mask (in this case, not particularly well) a deeper technological agenda. Ellul anticipates the argument made even today that so long as the end result is humanist/environmentalist, it matters not if the cause was genuine respect or technique. He declares this argument to be “hocus-pocus”: “Today’s technique may respect man [and nature] because it is in its interest and part of its normal course of development to do so. But we have no certainty that this will be so in

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25 *Society* was written before any real sense of ‘environmentalism’ as a popular movement (and hence, ‘environmentalist’ as a term), and indeed Ellul refers to a time even prior to his own writing.
the future . . . The only law [technique] follows is that of its own autonomous development” (340). He thus states that “it seems impossible to speak of a technical humanism” (340). We might justifiably then say that, according to Ellul, it seems impossible to speak of a technical environmentalism.

The problem is not so much the effect of individual techniques or individual technicians on humanity, but the “phenomenon of technical convergence” (391). It is a convergence of “systems or complexes of techniques,” which results in “an operational totalitarianism; no longer is any part of man free and independent of these techniques” (391).

This is part of the “total integration” of humanity into the technical world. “Until recently,” says Ellul, “we were obliged to think of man as divided in his relation to the technical world. One part of him was given over completely to the monster and subjected to the interior and exterior rules; but the other part he could keep for himself: his inner life, his family life, his psychic life” (410). This dichotomy of personality, Ellul argues, became more and more unacceptable, particularly to the “psychotechnicians in general” (411). Re-integration of the personality was then sought; but this inevitably means complete integration into technique. As Ellul states: “Since the human sciences are application of technical means, this entails rounding up those elements of the human personality that are still free and forcing (‘re-integrating’) them into the expanding technical order of things” (411). This pertains to recreational and spiritual activities: “Re-integration involves man’s covert spiritual activities as well as his over actions. Amusements, friendships, art – all must be compelled toward the new integration, thanks to which there is to be no more social maladjustment or neurosis” (411).
Resistance to technique

Particularly noteworthy in this light is how Ellul deals with the place of the spiritual and the ethical as forms of resistance to the invasion of technique. He notes that “abstract painting, surrealism, jazz; ethical forms such as ‘eroticism’ and the ‘politics of engagement’ are said to be manifestations of the supremacy of human freedom and will in the technical society” (415). He acknowledges that these are “sources of vital energy”; the problem, however, is that “every time the forces attempt to assert themselves, they are flung against a ring of iron with which technique surrounds and localizes them” (415). These expressions – “sex; passion for nature, the mountains, and the sea; passion for social and political action” – are all well and good, and they do indeed “express the deepest instinctive human passions,” but they have “also become totally innocuous. They question nothing, menace nobody” (416).26 “Such movements,” says Ellul, “are pure formalisms, pure verbalisms” (416-417).

He does admit, however, to being forced to reconsider such dismissal and other of his more dire assessments in light of the influential ‘counter-cultural’ movement of the late sixties:

...the events of 196827 and the development of the hippy movement led me to revise a certain number of conclusions I had drawn about the effects of technique on humanity. I was, I might say, more pessimistic before 1968 than after. I used to think that we were so trapped in the technical system that we had no further resources to draw on. And then 1968 brought an explosion which opened certain paths and which showed that we were not truly conditioned. (2004, 45)

This is an important alteration in his thought, but one that does not fundamentally change his argument about technique. Forms of resistance to technique, though perhaps more independent

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26 This did not, as we shall see, dissuade him from actively engaging in resistance activities.

27 In May of 1968 there were a series of protests, strikes and riots in France by students and workers that nearly toppled the de Gaulle government.
of the technical influence than he thought prior to 1968, are nonetheless inescapably part of the technical milieu. He later speaks of such forms of resistance as compensations for the technical phenomenon (including religion/spirituality), a notion I will return to in more detail in a later chapter.

With this shift in his perception in mind, Ellul’s dismissal in Society of the “modern passion for nature” in particular is still interesting: “When it is not stockbrokers out after moose, it is a crowd of brainless conformists camping out on order and as they are told. Nowhere is there any initiative or creativity” (1964, 417). Clearly he is overgeneralizing here, and somewhat quick to condemn, but there is no doubt some truth to his assertion, then and now. Technique is clearly present in many forms of ‘resistance.’ One can see where technique does interfere in the “nascent love of nature” (419), for example, in the controlling of state/provincial and national parks. People are invited to carefully and temporarily touch a piece of segregated nature in a controlled (by rules of conduct) manner, much as one would interact with a museum piece. Both in the rules of conduct and in the parcelling of species and habitats designated for preservation, once can see the hand of technique (which is not to deny the positive environmental consequences). The same can be said for social activism; political lobbying, one of the few ways to actually effect change, itself involves a great deal of technique as an organized and efficient effort. Even for grassroots movements, to be effective means to become organized into a collectivity, which Ellul demonstrates at length to be the realm of technique. As an example:

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Though Ellul himself was more of an ‘urban dweller’ than a ‘nature lover’ (though he generally disliked Paris), his friend Charbonneau was an active camper, and Ellul often accompanied him. He says in an interview with Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange: “I was thoroughly a city boy, and he lived only when he left the city. He taught me to know the forest and the mountains . . .” (1982, 140).
Only a collectivity can make itself felt in a world in which technique has given primacy to the quantitative rather than the qualitative. Since an inorganic mass would be inefficient, the collectivity must be optimally organized, with all that this implies in the way of unity, discipline, and tactical flexibility. These are the exclusive province of technical organization . . . Once again technique imposes its iron law on the generous strivings of the individual heart. (419-420)

Even outward expressions of critique and resistance are allowed, when co-opted by the technical system: “Technique as means . . . encourages and enables the individual to express his ecstatic reactions in a way never before possible. He can express criticism of his culture, and even loathing. He is permitted to propose the maddest solutions. The great law here is that all things are necessary to make a society and that even revolt is necessary to make a technical society” (424). Part of a genuinely technical society is a ‘built-in’ criticism of itself to act as a ‘steam valve’ for general discontent; a constant counter-cultural current that allows the disaffected to feel as though they are drumming a loud protest, when in fact they remain completely marginal, and fail utterly to stem the forward march of technique. To some extent, expressive and potentially revolutionary groups, associations, and movements actually help integrate people into technical society by giving expression to instincts and passions, but they are usually controlled. With this comes the illusion of freedom. Appropriately, Ellul quotes Goebbels to describe the overriding technical axiom: “You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order” (420). In any event, as we have seen, technique is pervasive enough to prevent any real challenge to the social order.

In making reference to Goebbels, Ellul in fact foreshadows his particular focus, in a later

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29 I will come back to the place of the individual in technical society in later discussion. As we will see, Ellul was not quite so utterly dismissive of the potential of small, committed groups to effect positive change and genuinely challenge the dominant technical paradigm as may be suggested here.
work, on the subject of propaganda. In this book, Propaganda (originally published in 1962, translated 1965), he takes a detailed look at what he believes to be a crucial technique; the “Siamese twin of our technological society” (Kellen 1965, v). Propaganda itself is not only a technique, Ellul argues, “it is also an indispensable condition for the development of technical progress and the establishment of a technological civilization” (Ellul 1965, x). It brings people in line with other technique: “In the midst of increasing mechanization and technological organization, propaganda is simply the means used to prevent these things from being felt as too oppressive and to persuade man to submit with good grace” (xviii). Obviously, he is describing something broader and more prevalent than wartime propaganda. He describes it as a general necessity for the state, given the impossibility of adhering to the multiplicity of the different whims and beliefs of the populace: “. . . as the government cannot follow opinion, opinion must follow government” (126). The other side of the coin, according to Ellul, is that humanity in technological society subconsciously desires and needs the technique of propaganda: “. . . propaganda fills a need of modern man, a need that creates in him an unconscious desire for propaganda. He is in the position of needing outside help to be able to face his condition. And that aid is propaganda” (138). People need coherence of values in the mass of information, and something to fill the void of meaning (146-147).

Propaganda, once in service of ideologies\(^{30}\), is now itself the directive force: “Propaganda’s task is less and less to propagate ideologies; it now obeys its own laws and becomes autonomous” (196). The lack of ends, or a notion of the higher good (a hallmark of technique generally), is evident given the predominance of propaganda. Ideology becomes the

\(^{30}\)Ellul uses this term in the more common sense, as opposed to the one given by Segundo.
tool of the propagandist, and is completely ignored otherwise: “Ideology not used by propaganda is ineffective and not taken seriously” (201). Similarly, action dictates ideology, rather than the reverse: “Through action one learns to believe in ‘some truth,’ and even to formulate it” (201).

The points clearly relate to the exclusive emphasis by technique on *means*, particularly means that secure a seamless integration of further technique. The “great innovation” of Lenin, then taken further still by Hitler, “was to understand that the modern world is essentially a world of ‘means’; that what is most important is to utilize all the means at man’s disposal; and that ends and aims have been completely transformed by the profusion of means” (195). He continues:

> The fact that man in the nineteenth century was still searching for ends led him to neglect most of the available means. Lenin’s stroke of genius was to see that, in reality, in our twentieth century, the ends had come to be secondary to the means or, in many cases, of no importance at all. What mattered was primarily to set all available instruments in motion and to push them to their limits. (195)

With this, the relationship between ideology and propaganda changed: “Propaganda then became the major fact; with respect to it, ideologies became mere epiphenomena” (196).

We can see that environmentalism, for example, as an *ideology* in Ellul’s sense, is thus at serious risk of being subject to propaganda, particularly with ‘the environment’ becoming a catchword or slogan, reduced to a stimulus “capable of obtaining reflexes in public opinion” (199). I will return to an examination of Segundo’s argument for the role of referential witnesses in light of this understanding of propaganda in the next chapter.

**The technical system**

Though *Society* and *Propaganda* were two of Ellul’s earlier and more famous works on technique, he updates his ideas somewhat by applying systems theory in his 1977 publication
In the opening pages of *System*, he comments:

“All the things making up the societal life—work, leisure, religion, culture, institutions—all these things were “torn apart and more or less irreducible to one another.” And it is easy to state that they are now technicized, homogenized, and integrated in a new whole, which is not the society. No more meaningful social or political organization is possible for this ensemble, every part of which is subordinate to the technologies and linked to other parts by the technologies. “All that reigns is the eternal substitution of homogenous elements.” (15)

This is more of a refinement of his earlier description of technique than a replacement. Ellul wishes to emphasize that society itself has not yet become the “megamachine,” conflated with the technological system. He stresses:

*In reality, we must not confuse the technological system and the technological society. The system exists in all its rigor, but it exists within the society, living in and off the society and grafted upon it. There is a duality here exactly as there is between nature and the machine. The machine works because of natural products, but it does not transform nature into a machine. Society too is a “natural product.” At a certain level, culture and nature overlap, forming society, in a totality that becomes a nature for man. And into this complex comes a foreign body, intrusive and unreplaceable: the technological system. It does not turn society into a machine. It fashions society in terms of its necessities; it uses society as an underpinning; it transforms certain of society’s structures. But there is always something unpredictable, incoherent, and irreducible in the social body.* (18)

A bit later, Ellul adds: “We can thus say that the technological society is one in which a technological system has been installed” (18).

This is obviously an important distinction. Without taking away from the seriousness and pervasiveness of technique, Ellul’s refinement of his description allows for other elements in society that, though integrated into the technological system, can resist it. However, Ellul notes
that the system grafts itself onto society, like a parasite, thus fundamentally changing it. He in fact explains the technological system by explicitly comparing it to cancer:

A cancer within another living system is itself an organism – but incapable of surviving on its own. The same holds true for the technological system. On the one side, it can appear, develop, exist only to the extent that it integrates into a social body existing apart from it. One cannot conceive of technology like “nature,” as able to live on its own. Social nature is pre-existent to the technological system, which finds its integration, its possibilities, its support in social nature. Yet on the other side, the growth of technology does not leave the social body intact, nor does it allow its various elements to develop by and of themselves. (80-81)

Society as a whole, though not perfectly technological, cannot be considered apart from the grafted (or ‘cancerous’) technological system.

The computer – the major technological innovation between the writing of Society and System – is for Ellul pivotal in the establishment of the technological system, and its epitome. “In reality,” he says, “it is the computer that allows the technological system to definitively establish itself as a system” (98). He gives this description earlier in System:

The data processor is an element of connection, of coordination among a huge number of technologies, just as in itself it is the product of diverse technologies conjoined. People thus came to a new conception of technology, as an environment and as a system. That is to say: The combined technologies, affecting the totality of human actions and life-styles, took on a qualitatively different importance. Technology was no longer an addition of “techniques.” By combining and universalizing, observers have now given it a kind of autonomy and specificity. (26-27)

The computer is at the front and centre of linking together technologies (techniques) into an integrated system. Again, Ellul’s descriptions are prophetic when one considers the grandest of all computer linkages, the Internet, which has unquestionably further assimilated disparate elements of society into the technological system (perhaps more than anything prior).
Technology as a *system*, then, is a more complex and nuanced understanding than technological society. Ellul also goes beyond *Society* in his understanding of technique as means. He states:

> Even when technology is abstract, a procedure, an organization, it is far more of a mediation than an instrument. People generally conceive of technology as a means of action allowing man to do what he was unable to achieve by his own means. This is true, of course. But it is much more important to consider that these "means" are a mediation between man and his natural environment. (34)

More than simply instruments, technology is the filter through which we understand and interact with our environment. Further, technology has become the *only* mediation: “There are no other relationships between man and nature; the whole set of complex and fragile bonds that man has potentially fashioned – poetic, magic, mythical, symbolic bonds – vanishes. There is only the technological mediation, which imposes itself and becomes total. Technology then forms both a continuous screen and a generalized mode of involvement” (35).

Ellul devotes the second part of *System* to examining the characteristics of the technological system in detail, split between characteristics of the technological phenomenon and those of technological progress. Essentially, he adds three more characteristics to those he expounded on in *Society*: totalization\(^{31}\), “causal progression and absence of finality,” and “the problem of acceleration.” In particular, concerning the absence of finality, Ellul rightly notes that though the ultimate goal of technology (when it is considered at all) is thought to be the general ‘happiness’ of humankind, this is an extremely vague notion. Equally vague is the notion of a

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\(^{31}\)A characteristic he does in fact touch upon in *Society* under the heading “The Necessary Linking Together of Techniques” (see Ch. 2).
future ideal human type that technology is striving to bring about (258). In any case, argues Ellul, any finalities given are merely ideological addendums; they are essentially “justifications for some technological project, justifications added a posteriori, which the technological phenomenon, by itself, does not need” (267). When kept sufficiently vague, however, they appease a utopian desire for ends without being substantial enough to be contested.

The ‘bluff’ of technique

In The Technological Bluff, Ellul shifts his focus from the characteristics of technique to the popular discourse about technique. His purpose is to expose the ‘bluff’ of this discourse, “the gigantic bluff in which discourse on techniques envelops us, making us believe anything and, far worse, changing our whole attitude to techniques: the bluff of politicians, the bluff of the media, the bluff of technicians when they talk about techniques instead of working on them, the bluff of publicity, the bluff of economic models” (xvi). He continues: “The bluff consists essentially of rearranging everything in terms of technical progress, which with prodigious diversification offers us in every direction such varied possibilities that we can imagine nothing else” (xvi). It is to subtly ‘stack the deck’ so that discussions/discourse on technique invariably launches from the entrenched and unquestionable premise that further technique is the only real solution. George Grant also emphasizes this point, saying that “technology is the ontology of the age”: “The result of this is that when we are deliberating in any practical situation

32 Alongside of this, as Ellul identifies, is the question: Are scientists and technicians really the best people to decide the most desirable human type? (258).

33 For the discourse on technique, Ellul uses the term ‘technology’ (French la technologie); this is distinct from technique itself. This is what he considered the proper usage (see footnote 7 above).
our judgment acts rather like a mirror, which throws back the very metaphysic of the technology which we are supposed to be deliberating about in detail. The outcome is almost inevitably a decision for further technological development” (1986, 32-33).

The “great innovation” of modern techniques is that they have circumvented the normal opposition to the image of a vastly changed society (like that put forward in Huxley’s *Brave New World*) with ordinary, everyday transformation. As Ellul states:

> The genius of technique (not of technicians) is to produce the most reassuring and innocent ordinariness. This is what we are studying under the title of the technological bluff. We must try to make the situation clear. It is not that we or society are better adapted to technical growth, but only that we are, let’s say, neutralized in a way that there can no longer be any open or secret conflict. (1990, 19)

Further, as mentioned earlier, technique is always associated with general betterment, particularly in improving the human condition. The advancement of technique is in the name of humanism:

> “The issue now is the realizing of human possibilities that the limits of society, morality, and the body have thus far negated” (125).

The widely accepted discourse on technique shuns and devalues the non-technical, as we have seen; this includes *culture* as a whole. Ellul in fact posits that the technological system is the antithesis of culture, and states simply that “a technical culture is essentially impossible” (141). This, in turn, leads to a transformation in how we understand and study culture and humanity in general. He quotes Edgar Morin:

> The crisis in the humanities lies first of all in the area of knowledge. The predominance of information over knowledge, and of knowledge over thought, has disintegrated true knowledge. The sciences have contributed greatly to the disintegration by extreme specialization. Science can only create an aggregate of operational knowledge . . . By its relational and relativist character it saps the base of the humanities . . . In developing objectivity, science develops a permanent
duality between the subjective and the objective. (cited in Ellul 1990, 141)

The lack of culture in technological civilization means the lack of reflection. Says Ellul: “The intellectual and cultural tragedy of the modern world is that we are in a technical milieu that does not allow reflection. We cannot look at the past and consider it. We cannot fix on an object and reflect on it. The technical object encompasses us even though we know nothing about it, and reflection is impossible” (145).

* * *

This, then, is the (here somewhat oversimplified) picture Ellul paints of technical/technological civilization. Clearly, if one accepts it, and agrees with his characterization of technique and its pervasiveness in society, this presents a problem that cannot be ignored in any serious study of modern humanity. We must thus consider environmental ethics, and any operative notion of the good therein, in the light of the phenomenon of technique. Before turning to a more general discussion of ethics and the individual in technological society, bringing in the thoughts of Segundo, MacIntyre, and Taylor, I would like to consider briefly Ellul’s own sense of environmentalism; for though he spoke of technological determinism, he was active in his own resistance of it, including in his understanding of our relationship to the natural world. Here we may find at least a partial answer to the question of how to be environmentally ethical in the face of technique.

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34 Other authors, of course, have painted similar pictures, whether or not they were directly inspired by Ellul. For a fairly recent example, see Ursula Franklin’s published Massey Lectures, The Real World of Technology (originally 1990; expanded edition, 1999). Though she makes but one passing reference to him, many of Ellul’s ideas are echoed in her analysis.
Ellul and the environment

Ellul’s connection to environmentalism is evident in his practical involvement and in some of his writing (though he generally theorized more broadly than simply on ‘environmental issues’). Goddard argues that of his many political and social activities, “perhaps the most important was [his] involvement in the ecology movement” (2002, 47). In fact, he claims that Ellul and Charbonneau “can, in many ways, legitimately claim to be the originators of the French ecological movement in the pre-war personalist movement and the source of many environmentalist ideas” (47). For example, stemming from his early days in the personalist movement, where he encouraged and desired local governance in the form of “small-scale political units within a federal structure” (28), Ellul and his colleagues were the first to advocate the slogan ‘think globally, act locally,’ a credo now generally associated with environmentalism. These small groups would necessarily have a vastly reduced ‘ecological footprint’ (although in this context this term is anachronistic).

Goddard’s claim seems exaggerated, however, particularly in light of the fact that Ellul did not consider himself an environmentalist in his earlier days (and he never explicitly claimed to be one later). He in fact attributes his understanding of the importance of the threat to nature by technique entirely to Charbonneau. He states in an interview: “Technique seemed terribly dangerous to Charbonneau because it threatened nature and man in nature. It was dangerous to me insofar as it threatened man’s ability to hear the Word of God. We complemented each other well, our two arguments combining to make one fairly complete one, but our references were different” (1982, 143). He continues:

Around 1945 or 1946, when [Charbonneau] lamented the destruction of a forest to
build houses, I told him: “What do you want? People really need houses now.” The tangible needs of people seemed to me to take precedence over those of the natural environment. Charbonneau, while being an amazing intellectual, always had a much stronger sensory experience than I. Even so, he had foreseen that every time nature is called into question, man in his whole being is inevitably called into question also. (143-144)

It was only gradually, then, under the influence of Charbonneau, that Ellul began to include environmental issues in his deliberations about technique. In 1968, however, an environmental issue arrived at their doorstep, precipitating their first concrete involvement in environmental activism: opposition to development of the Aquitaine Region in the southwest of France by *La Mission Interministérielle d’Aménagement de la Côte Aquitaine* (MIACA). Again, Charbonneau was the first to get involved, but Ellul soon joined in the resistance of this effort to bring in thousands more tourists to an ecologically sensitive area. He was very clear about the motive for his involvement: “I committed myself totally because M.I.A.C.A. embodies in an overt and monstrous way three elements I detest: technocracy, the bureaucratic attitude, and capitalist power” (154).35

Once decided, though, his commitment was total; and indeed, his sympathy for the environmental cause more generally was clear. Commitment to the environment was a logical extension of his resistance of technique: “This was fully in keeping with all my research on the society dominated by technique and the present influence of industry on the transformation of the human environment. Hence, I was automatically in favour of working for ecology – the defence of the environment” (2004, 20).

35Note that he does not, in fact, explicitly include destruction of the environment as something he “detests”; whether this ‘lessens’ his environmental commitment is a debatable matter, given that he understands ecological devastation as a direct result of the elements he identifies as abhorrent. Other environmental issues arose to which he took a clear stance; one thinks in particular of his opposition to nuclear energy.
For Ellul, then, environmental issues relate entirely to the technical phenomenon.

Although Goddard may be correct in claiming that the failure of the opposition to halt the Aquitaine development plans “struck at the heart of many of Ellul’s concerns” and that “there is little doubt that it hardened his view of the modern world” (2002, 47), one can hardly believe that it would have surprised him. The inability to resist technique, in environmental issues or elsewhere, is something he had been pointing to since the original publication of Society. And though he sympathized with environmentalists, he remained clear that the real problem is much larger. When asked in an interview, “What links are there between your criticism of technological society and ecological thinking?” his response is:

They are very close that is for sure. I think the ecologists have the right and sensible attitude towards the environment but as far as doctrine is concerned I find them rather narrow and naive. They tend to polarize their efforts on limited objectives without taking into account all the consequences of technology on the human psyche. There is a modification taking place in our being that the ecologists don’t envisage.

What is more[,] technology is not the only cause of destruction of Nature. Technology may accelerate changes[,] however we should never lose sight of the fact that what we call Nature today is in fact a product of hundreds of years of man’s interaction with the environment. (Ellul 1998, 119 [interview originally published in French in 1994])

He later adds: “. . . I do believe that what ecologists lack is an overall grasp of technical phenomena and the technological society” (119-120).

It is clear that though Charbonneau’s environmentalism stems from a love of nature, whatever environmentalism can be attributed to Ellul arises from a combination of his critique of the technical phenomenon and his theological beliefs. Some of his more detailed elaborations on his conception of nature and humanity’s relationship to it are within a wholly theological context,
particularly in his interpretation of Genesis. Like several other contemporary theologians, Ellul tackles the biblical mandate to have ‘dominion’ over nature. In his article “The Relationship Between Man and Creation in the Bible” (1984), he questions the complete domination of creation by humanity: “. . . is it [man’s] role to use all that is usable? Is it his role to enslave creation (where there is, as all knowledge confirms, an immense, perhaps the greatest, generosity) to efficiency, to power, and to utility?” (142). There are practical consequences to ignoring this question, and to setting up a theology exalting humanity’s subjugation of nature, none the least of which is ecological destruction.

Ellul is very clear about the inherent value of the earth as God’s creation:

“To inherit the earth” is as important as “to see God.” The comparison reveals how much God loves creation with all that it includes, its variety, its blossoming; and it means that the ecological destruction is of the order of sin – as considerable as war, genocide, the exploitation of man by man, injustice. There is no scale of sin; there is only the immensity of the love of God from which man claims to escape, the love which still endures for this creation that we ravage. (152)

This is clearly a strongly pro-environment theological position, one that reflects a growing ecological consciousness by the time he published the words in 1984. This translates to emphatic positions on current ecological issues, such as industrial livestock operations: “I say very strongly that the new systems of breeding, with the use of synthetic chemicals to accelerate growth, are clear sins, aggravating the disorder of the world beyond the limits acceptable to God” (148).

He in fact takes Jews and Christians, as those who “received and believed the Word of God,” to task for not averting the technological turn and consequent ecological crisis: “I say very

clearly that the holiness of Israel and the Church in the 19th and 20th centuries would have been to take a strict position on the limits of scientific pride, the application of techniques and the exploitation of nature” (153).37

These strong theological positions should not mask his clear statements on the reality of ‘nature’ as we refer to it, and its relationship to artificiality, which he expounds on directly in another article, “Nature, Technique, and Artificiality” (published four years prior, in 1980). The perceived ‘artificiality’ of technique (or what we would more commonly think of as technology in English) leads to “a more extreme evaluation of nature”: “Nature is endangered by technique, it appears as the sole refuge, the only remedy, the only compensation vis-à-vis the excesses of the technical system” (Ellul 1980a, 264). The dichotomy as ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ is thus set up, and our enslavement to technique comes at the expense of the natural, and our connection to it. Yet, as Ellul argues, it is a mistake to think of humans themselves as ‘natural’ (as opposed to ‘artificial’): “. . . man as worker does not obey the laws of the environment and the ecological balance, but rather obeys his own ‘law,’ his desire, his power, his interests – that is to say, a collection of voluntary and sometimes calculated factors (for example, the hunters or fishermen who respect the game in order to allow reproduction)” (265). Our control of our environment is thus inherently ‘artificial’; it involves our creation, our artifaces, and our manipulation. The concept of ‘nature’ itself is a creation; a kind of artiface. This why he can say in System that “the natural does not have an eminent or normative value for me” (47).

37This calls to mind Lynn White Jr.’s influential critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition in his 1967 article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”; White, however, accuses the tradition (Western Christianity in particular) of fostering a cosmology and worldview inimical to the natural environment, rather than merely being complicit in the exploitation of nature.
The artificiality of technique, thus, is not its evil: “. . . the artificial aspect of techniques is not abnormal and the invention of techniques, the production of an artificial environment, is not evil . . . [T]he problem raised by modern techniques is not at all their artificiality which would be judged by the standard of nature – an artificial nature in the face of a natural good” (1980a, 267). In fact artifice is technique, and, according to Ellul, has been at the basis of our relationship to creation since the Fall of humankind from Eden (where there was no technique).

Artifice – technique – is in many ways actually freedom from the necessities of nature. Central to Ellul’s critique, however, is that because of the radical newness of the technical phenomenon, this has been reversed. Instead of achieving some level of human freedom through partial control of a world dominated by ‘natural’ necessity, artificial ‘freedom’ has become slavery to technique, and the complete destruction of the natural environment, which in turn destroys the meaningfulness of human life “in the interrelationship between the natural and the artificial” (277). Freedom requires the necessity of the natural: “We know freedom only when we have to struggle against a destiny” (277-278).

It is in this, the concept of true freedom through limit, that we find a partial answer at least to the seemingly insoluble problem of being ethical – and indeed being spiritual, since Ellul often does not distinguish between the two – within our technological civilization. I will return to this concept in the concluding chapter; first, however, I will turn to situating the theories of the previously examined thinkers – Segundo, MacIntyre, and Taylor – within the context of Ellul’s

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38 For an elaboration of this theological argument, see his chapter “Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis” in Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis (1984). Notice here that Ellul readily acknowledges that technique has always been a part of human life (post-Fall); it is the technical phenomenon as described earlier that he thinks is unique and particularly worrisome in modernity.
analysis of technological society, and to completing the picture of ethics in modernity.
Chapter 5  
Bridging Theories: A Cross-Section of Modern Ethics in Technological Society

It is clear that the authors examined in the previous three chapters have in common, at the very least, a concern with the construction of meaning and ethical orientation in contemporary Western society, and the impacts of the dominant liberal, technological paradigm thereupon. Each draws his conclusions from straightforward observation and analysis of the human condition.

The question remains, however, in what specific ways their analyses complement one another to form a more complete picture. Naturally, it cannot be said that they fit together like a jigsaw puzzle; each has a fairly comprehensive idea of the state of humanity, and ethics, in modernity, and there are certainly elements within each idea that are incommensurate. Nonetheless, I wish in this chapter to weave together some of the threads, as I have drawn them out from each theorist, to form a fuller understanding of people’s construction of values- and meaning-systems.

As I have argued, it is Ellul in my view who offers the most complete analysis of contemporary Western (and, increasingly, non-Western) society, and so it is on his overall canvas that I add the brushstrokes of Segundo, MacIntyre, and Taylor. In so doing I will review what I deem to be the salient, related points raised by each.

*Segundo revisited*

The first and most important point drawn from Segundo’s analysis is that we have freedom of will in choosing our paths in life, particularly in achieving values we set out for
ourselves as worth attaining. The problem, as Ellul shows, is that we are at best highly pressured, and at worst forced, to recognize only those values that perpetuate technique; all others are removed from the discourse entirely. And yet, presumably, at the level of the individual at least, something of Segundo’s observation must still hold; in being critically aware of the prominence of technique and values associated with it, we can choose to wilfully reject them, and instead champion values (and an absolute value) that fall outside the technical sphere.

Also of importance is that in speaking of the process by which we choose the ends to which we strive, Segundo clearly assumes that we have some clear idea of ends. Again, Ellul highlights one of the hallmarks of the technical system: means subsume ends, and indeed become ends unto themselves (though of course Ellul is not the only one to make this point). This, clearly, strikes at the heart of what Segundo argues, particularly in his distinction between ideologies as means, and faith as determinant of ends. As mentioned, he argues that ideology cannot take the place of faith (in his sense of these terms); this leads him to conclude that science and reason, as an ideology, can serve different meaning-structures (Segundo 1984, 107). What happens, however, when inherent to a meaning-structure is the championing of efficacy or the ‘one best means’ alone, as is characteristic of technological society? At the least, the supposed neutrality of science and technology comes into question, because the meaning-structure leading to the predominance of scientific and technological thinking in the first place is hidden. But as Ellul shows, the effect is deeper; the very acknowledgment of and careful reflection on meaning-structures is pushed aside or entirely eliminated.

Again, however, Segundo’s analysis remains useful if we emphasize that from a purely phenomenological point of view, we certainly behave as though we wish to attain certain end-
points, including what Segundo describes as the absolute value. This, indeed, fuels our faith in technical progress; like a carrot dangling in front of the horse, utopian happiness, freedom from suffering and need, lies just ahead on the path of technique. This is the ultimate transcendent datum, as Segundo describes in his framework, which we trust as the ultimate satisfaction. But further, we can draw from Segundo’s argument that having a clear idea of our operative meaning-structures (which are inherent to being human) can allow us to create ones that are not insubstantial or ephemeral (the carrot on the stick).

Segundo’s notion of referential witnesses, though again not discredited, is nonetheless impacted by an incorporation of Ellul’s analysis. If we accept Ellul’s picture, everywhere we turn, no matter who we hold up as such a witness, technical values are reflected. This relates directly to the pervasiveness of technique, and of propaganda. The witnesses in many cases have become technicians and propagandists of technique. Ellul’s analysis of propaganda in fact forces a reassessment of the role of referential witnesses on the whole. The formation of values and meaning-structure cannot be understood in isolation from the context of our modern mass society, which has replaced smaller, more organic groups. The sheer volume of information today is overwhelming. We cannot choose freely what is true, Ellul argues, or make a considered judgment:

... the mechanisms of modern information induce a sort of hypnosis in the individual, who cannot get out of the field that has been laid out for him by the information. His opinion will ultimately be formed solely on the basis of the facts transmitted to him, and not on the basis of his choice and his personal experience. The more the techniques of distributing information develop, the more the individual is shaped by such information. It is not true that he can choose freely with regard to what is presented to him as the truth. (Ellul 1965, 87)

A genuinely individualist but mass society, such as ours in the contemporary West, is in fact fertile
ground for propaganda: “The permanent uncertainty, the social mobility, the absence of sociological protection and of the traditional frames of reference – all these inevitably provide propaganda with a malleable environment that can be fed information from the outside and conditioned at will” (92).

Thus, in all cases of “second-hand” opinion – facts and issues disseminated in large societies – propaganda is found (101). This is how public opinion is formed, but it is also operative at the level of individual creation of meaning-structure. In a very different context, Ellul gives a similar description to Segundo of the formation of values, linked to religion: “One might go further and say that propaganda tends to give a person a religious personality: his psychological life is organized around an irrational, external, and collective tenet that provides a scale of values, rules of behavior, and a principle of social integration” (166-167). This results in a kind of secular dogmatism:

In a society in the process of secularization, propaganda responds to the religious need, but lends much more vigor and intransigence to the resulting religious personality, in the pejorative sense of that term (as liberals employed it in the nineteenth century): a limited and rigid personality that mechanically applies divine commandments, is incapable of engaging in human dialogue, and will never question values that it has placed above the individual. (167)

Obviously, this is not at all what Segundo has in mind with his notion of referential witnesses; we must acknowledge the real possibility, however, that in fact propaganda has taken the role of referential witnesses in the process of transmitting values.¹

Needless to say, this is disastrous to any notion of genuine freedom. Propaganda has an alienating effect on people (from themselves), and renders them infantile; individuals become

¹Ellul speaks of propaganda taking the role of the leader of a group, which can be paralleled to a referential witness.
“submerged in mass psychology” (173). This is common to all victims of contemporary propaganda:

Everywhere we find people who have blind confidence in a political party, a general, a movie star, a country, or cause, and who will not tolerate the slightest challenge to that god. Everywhere we meet people who, because they are filled with the consciousness of Higher Interests they must serve unto death, are no longer capable of making the simplest moral or intellectual distinctions or of engaging in the most elementary reasoning. (173-174)

Genuine reflection or analysis, says Ellul, is marginalized in favour of blind faith.

Ellul provides little by way of encouragement or prescription at the end of Propaganda, except to stress the importance of awareness in championing truth and freedom over propaganda (the latter destroys the former). Without taking away from the seriousness of the implications of his analysis, we need not necessarily accept the direness with which he characterizes the situation. Importantly, Segundo stresses that one of the features of a tradition of referential witnesses is the emphasis on learning how to learn, an inherently non-dogmatic, adaptable process. There is undoubtedly a responsibility to be vigilant about the existence and prominence of technique, and the role of propaganda in particular in the transmission of values and ideas; however, I believe there is scope to resist it in choosing which referential witnesses to have in the creation of our own meaning-structures as individuals (in other words, in our faith).

Yet, again, it is nonetheless possible to say that in the strict sense that Segundo uses the term, we have faith in technique, as manifested through the beliefs and actions of the vast majority of people in society. Consequently, adopting Segundo’s model, the very basis of our frameworks of values, the meaningful structuring of experience, is technique.

The insidiousness of technique is that it postures as a means to an end; in other words, as
a value that falls lower on the scale of values, and serves as a means to bring about the 
unconditioned *absolute* value. Again, we think of how easy and, for the most part, unquestioned 
it has been to accept the value-neutrality of technique. One of the consequences, then, of the 
conclusion that technical means have become their own ends is that the highest value in most 
people’s scales has become technique itself. It is important to remember that Segundo himself 
emphasizes that the absolute value, in this context, has nothing to do with the Absolute, in the 
theistic (or generally religious) sense.

Thus we come to the point anticipated in Chapter Two: faith and ideology, in Segundo’s 
sense, have become confused and conflated within the technological system. We can add to this 
the problem of modern propaganda filling the role of referential witnesses. Segundo’s basic 
analysis of means that are used to realize our values corresponds more neatly to pre-modernity, 
where technique was far more restricted; before (roughly speaking) the time of the Industrial 
Revolution, as Ellul places it, and the development of the technical *phenomenon*. As I noted in 
Chapter Two, this is the fundamental weakness of Segundo’s analysis, but one that does not 
render impotent his framework; indeed, his phenomenological observations, seen in the light of 
Ellul’s analysis of technique, help shed further light on the problem of creating meaning and, 
fundamentally, being ethical in a technological age.

Also relevant are Segundo’s observations about the intractability of faith in adulthood in 
particular, and the fact that ideology is often altered (in perception, and where possible, in fact) in 
pursuit of the object of faith. An interesting logical conundrum develops in understanding these 
terms in light of Ellul’s analysis. Technique as *ideology*, the ensemble of means, is malleable in 
the pursuit of technique as *absolute value* and object of faith. In fact, as Ellul demonstrates, this
is precisely what occurs, and exactly what sociologists and philosophers of technique are pointing to when observing that technique always engenders further technique. The confusion of these two things, Segundo’s twin dimensions of faith and ideology, leads to a masterful self-perpetuation encapsulated in the sentence “if we can do it, technically, than we ought to do it, morally.” This is at heart a question of ethics; when one has determined one’s scale of values, and thus one’s framework of meaning, one is oriented in ethical space. I will come back to this when re-examining Taylor’s arguments.

Religion, as we have seen, for Segundo generally falls into the category of ideology; means to the realization of values. When a religious institution becomes empty instrumentality, as Segundo charges is often the case, it becomes faithless, and very much parallel to the technical ethos (with religious and psychological needs being fulfilled by propaganda). Segundo’s critique of the social institution of religion, thus, is significantly comparable to a larger critique of technique. It is a critique that can be extended to any institution, resistant or revolutionary as it might outwardly appear, that does not have clearly distinguished (non-technical) values or ends, the realization of which directs its existence.

On the other hand, Segundo’s blurring of the distinction, from his anthropological analysis, between what we might call secular ‘ideologies’ (in the more common sense) and religious ‘traditions’ (again, in the more common sense), clearly implies that the ‘spiritual’ impulse and the ‘ethical’ impulse behind a social cause such as environmentalism have far more significant commonalities than differences. I touched upon this at the end of Chapter One, in looking at the

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2See also, in this regard, Grant’s essay “Thinking About Technology” in Technology and Justice (1986). Of course, particular technologies are sometimes stifled economically if perceived to be a threat to larger, corporate technological interests; see, for example, the documentary Who Killed the Electric Car? (2006).
notion of ‘secular spirituality.’ The parallels are particularly noteworthy in the context of pervasive technique, where what is more important than the specifics of the language used in ‘religious’ versus ‘secular environmental’ circles is the kind of language; in this instance, in both cases being distinctly anti-technical in the inclusion of a notion of a transcendent good.

As mentioned, Segundo reminds us that despite whatever necessity there may be to have a larger conception of the transcendent as operative in our valuation and creation of meaning, values – and ethics – are necessarily transmitted via human examples, the referential witnesses. Though this need can be filled by a propagandist state, discrimination between good faith (with a clearer sense of genuine ends) and bad faith is crucial. Segundo’s model can still apply, and it reminds us that there should be an inherently social dimension to ethics, placing an emphasis on tradition and education; a tradition of witnesses, we have seen, is the second characteristic which makes anthropological faith distinctly religious faith, in Segundo’s use of the term. I have already explored the potential implications of this for the environmental movement, given that ‘religious faith’ in Segundo’s sense can clearly apply to traditions that are not conventionally religious; in particular, the strength that Segundo sees in the solidarity of a tradition of good faith.

Segundo also reminds us that our faith is prior to the belief in a transcendent power (God, or otherwise); this is a particularly important point in making his analysis of the structure of ethics relevant to non-theists. To return briefly to my ethnographic work, this point is reflected in the general reactions given by interview participants; while few would claim that the source of their values is a traditionally religious belief (such as in God’s commandment), nearly all imply in their descriptions an anchoring of their sense of meaning in something transcendent of human experience (what some willingly describe as the spiritual). I will return in more detail to my
ethnographic findings in the next chapter.

Without repeating my analysis of how Segundo’s framework can helpfully illumine the nature of environmental ethics, let me add, in light of Ellul’s arguments, that environmental values represent a more genuine faith; one that more authentically distinguishes between ends and means, faith and ideology. It is also one that can represent a viable alternative to the confused meaning-structure of technique, and a more genuine one than that of propaganda. For, as even Ellul admits intermittently in his writing, human beings are not at core the cold, fully rational beings that technique would require for maximum efficiency and promulgation of further technique; nor, I would add, must they completely succumb to state propaganda. We simply do not function well without a strong, clear (rather than conflated), and genuine sense of faith and ideology.

Let me return now to the question put aside in Chapter Two: how exactly an environmental absolute value would be perceived, as either transcendent or immanent. While undoubtedly many environmentalists have experienced some kind of direct communion with non-human nature (confirmed in my ethnographic work), the source of this communion remains very difficult to identify; in a real sense, it is transcendent (and here again, perhaps, is suggested a reason the term spirituality is apt, and is being espoused more and more by even non-religious people). Further, when one understands how this translates into a meaningful scale of values, and into a program of action, one notes that what is foremost – the absolute, unconditioned value, in Segundo’s terminology – is the inviolable, transcendent sense of the good of ‘nature,’ or more broadly of planetary life (including the life of the planet as a whole).

Clearly, we must push Segundo a step further in the question of the existence of a notion
of a transcendent good. As noted in Chapter Two, the relative and the absolute are bound in Segundo’s notion of faith. We have seen that this must be problematized, however, given that the very thing that gives legitimacy to environmentalism as a form of resistance to the technical system is a transcendent notion of the good to which faith is anchored. But the structure of the creation of meaning, a strong faith, and a reasonable ideology, in what Segundo deems to be its most successful form, is something we can see reflected in the environmental movement; going from the historical contingencies (Segundo’s “signs of the times”), to the creation of a meaningful scale of values (faith), to an anchoring of this faith in an operative notion of the transcendent good.

And of course, if we dare to take it one step further still and consider the potential of the environmental movement to be a cultural tradition, from within which more narrow (religious, in Segundo’s sense) traditions of referential witnesses can spring, we might hope for a genuinely powerful alternative to the technical system within society. All the while, environmentalists must remain vigilant that the movement does not become tainted by propaganda (a very real threat, given the currently high status environmentalism holds in political arenas).

*MacIntyre revisited*

The first step in connecting MacIntyre and Ellul’s theories is to link the gradual abandonment of Aristotelian teleology, and its replacement with doomed Enlightenment-based moral systems, with the rise and dominance of technique. Though perhaps the changes in moral philosophy began earlier, the ascendancy of forms of utilitarianism in particular – which MacIntyre identifies with the failed Enlightenment project – proved propitious indeed for the
establishment and flourishing of technique.

MacIntyre notes that the fact “there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture” is symptomatic of a confused moral scheme, maintaining bits and pieces of value- and telos-laden moral language without the full Aristotelian ethical framework; yet this fact in and of itself hastens the rise to predominance of technique as moral arbiter. Technique can brook no higher notion of human telos; its sole criterion is the rationally inferred one best means. And in fact, the lack of moral agreement cements the universalization of technique, seen as the morally-neutral and thus agreeable tool outside of interminable moral debate. The trouble, as Ellul has shown, is that technique is not in fact morally neutral, and it subsumes all other notions of morality. And so the language of rationality, objectivity, and truth, no longer founded on any agreed upon moral framework, becomes the exclusive province of technique.

Emotivism, so harshly (and rightly) criticized by MacIntyre (and Taylor) for its philosophical incoherence, is nonetheless the perfect surrender of moral philosophy to technique. Moral judgments are universally and wholly expressions of preference and feeling; acceptable for the private sphere, but utterly inefficient, and thus unacceptable, in public discourse, research, and governance. MacIntyre’s further identification of the salient characteristic of emotivism – that it “entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations” – again is confirmed within Ellul’s analysis, particularly of propaganda techniques. With no strong moral positioning possible, at least according to an emotivist understanding, people’s values are forever subject to the most influential forces; and in our society, as Ellul has shown, these are undoubtedly technical ones. Hence his claim that ideologies (in the conventional sense) follow, rather than precede, technical action. MacIntyre’s ‘characters’
of the Manager and the Therapist, as representatives of our moral culture, could not be better representatives of technique (confirmed by MacIntyre in his own words that they are both concerned not with ends but with technique).

Also, connected to emotivism is the estrangement of *is* from *ought*, and the importance of the value-neutral fact. Obviously, this is key to the discourse of technique; but the interesting twist is that the only *ought* comes from what it is possible to technically *do*. Though epistemology and morality are sundered in modernity, the relationship has perhaps been recast so that *applicability* (or *potential applicability*), in a general sense, becomes the only progenitor of *ought*.

In the face of the dominance of technique in society, the notion of ‘rights’ (human, environmental, etc.) is essentially toothless; as MacIntyre argues, there is a lack of an objective criterion. With such a lack, technique is the predetermined winner; value-neutral methodology always trumps confused moralism. The same holds true for protest.

What MacIntyre critiques as the culture of ‘liberalism’ we can easily parallel with Ellul’s system of technique. When MacIntyre argues that there is a lack of an overriding notion of good within liberalism, and that values are treated as preferences, we can see clearly again a perfect context for the embeddedness of technique, where means are exalted over ends.

MacIntyre, as has been noted, sees only two options in reconstituting modern moral philosophy into something coherent: following Nietzsche, or following Aristotle. He clearly opts for the latter. For Ellul personally, as we caught a glimpse of in my brief mention of his theology, the only acceptable context of a form of Aristotelianism is the Christian one, with an emphasis on God’s Revelation and radical otherness. Unsurprisingly, given their usually Western origins, other
thinkers in his vein have also ‘retreated’ into a form of Christianity. The question, then, is whether or not an acceptable non-theological version of this is possible; we have seen that in part, at least, it can be found in forms of environmentalism.

Taylor revisited

As a foil to MacIntyre, Taylor is important; he reminds us that ‘good morality’ is possible in modern society, even given the limitations MacIntyre aptly delineates.

Transplanting Taylor’s language into the technical context Ellul describes is straightforward. What Taylor calls “procedural ethics,” the ordering and summing of “de facto goods,” can describe the kind of technical morality that has become dominant. Any notion of higher good is removed, so that goods are instrumental (and thus susceptible to homogenization according to the ‘one best means,’ or ‘best practices’ in business). As Taylor argues, procedural ethics are “incoherent”; none the least of which reason being that they cloak a very real hierarchy of values. This we saw in Taylor’s analysis of strong evaluation; we are, by nature, beings “for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers.” In other words, as was discussed, we make distinctions of worth in our desires. Built into this, whether we recognize it or not, is a sense of human ends. The language of technique, allowing only for quantitative comparisons of means, stifle what Taylor exposes as a fundamental aspect of humanity.

Not only does Taylor’s analysis thus seriously undermine any presupposition of value-neutrality in means of decision-making, but it also challenges the dominant assumption that ethics are, and can only be, procedural or emotive; that is, subjects of preference and emotion alone.
As we saw, Taylor in many aspects echoes what Segundo argues, in demonstrating the presence of an operative notion of the good (conceived either as a hierarchy of values with an ‘absolute value,’ or of goods with a ‘hypergood’). Taylor wishes to rescue certain characteristically modern ‘hypergoods,’ such as a commitment to an “ethic of authenticity,” which is an important check to total anti-modernism. The ethic of authenticity, moral emphasis on self-realization, when properly redeemed from its debased form of individualistic relativism, holds much promise for resisting the homogeneity of technique. This is particularly true when emphasizing the individual as the locus of ethical change, through the development of virtues (again, a notion I will return to next chapter). As Taylor shows, however, we need not agree specifically on hypergoods in order to communicate on a moral level.

Taylor recognizes the weakness of modern moral philosophy that is concerned exclusively with “what it is right to do rather than with what it is good to be”; again, we can see how this idea nicely rationalizes the predominance of technique. It is a moral philosophy of action in a system founded on action. Again, we must remember the ascendence of means as ends unto themselves; moral action, what it is right to do, become entirely determined by what we can do, and the most efficient way to do it. As a result, utilitarianism has become the moral tool of technique; quantitative assessments of costs and benefits, risks and payoffs.

On the other hand, Taylor’s notion of the modern social imaginary seems incomplete without an acknowledgment of the role of technique. Technological society, from Ellul’s analysis, would constitute the most powerful of Taylor’s social imaginaries. Again, however, there is room to broaden or alter our social imaginaries so that the autonomy of the modern individual, and sense of equality and community within a shared space, is preserved, without a universal
surrender to the homogenization and self-augmentation of technique.

**Overall points of connection – a cross-section of modern ethics**

Thus we can see clear points of contact between the insightful analyses of all four thinkers. These, I think, paint an accurate, if stark, picture of contemporary liberal ethics, which I will summarize and augment in the latter half of this chapter.

There is clearly an unhealthy and unbalanced reverence of means over ends (or, in Segundo’s terms, faithless ideology). The question of *why*, in modernity, has given way to *how*; in Segundo’s terms, “the meaning-efficacy dualism gave way to a monism which spread throughout our culture, and this monism was structured in terms of efficiency alone” (1984, 106). He believes that only recently (at the time of his writing, the 1980s) have questions of “why and wherefore” been put back on the agenda, for a variety of reasons, including “ecological imbalances” (106); it is safe to say, however, that these questions have still not penetrated the dominant liberal discourse (though this may be changing). There is also reason to believe that to even put these questions back on the agenda constitutes an enormous challenge in our modern moral culture.

We are losing (or have lost) our sense of ends, or *telos*, by disengagement from our world (an ideal particularly espoused by modern science and technology, but characteristic of liberalism generally). As Taylor argues: “We objectify our situation to the extent that we can overcome a sense of it as what determines for us our paradigm purposes and ends, and can come to see it and function in it as a neutral environment, within which we can effect the purposes which we determine out of ourselves” (1985, 4).
Related to this is the argument that is has been divorced from ought. This is the radical separation of epistemology and morality that occurs with the rejection of the Aristotelian framework. It represents a purely mechanical (and thus technical) understanding of the environment, that has had disastrous consequences on the health of both human and non-human nature. Though some environmentalists, on some level at least, wish to resist this framework (as I noted when discussing MacIntyre), they can find few ways to effectively do so.

Without a sense of overall purpose or telos, we are entirely subject to the imperial demands of technical efficiency. Any human activity, regardless of how destructive to the environment (and to ourselves), can be justified, viewed through extremely narrow-scoped and rose-tinted glasses; the right means at any given time, isolated from any notion of a larger context.

This is intimately related to the lack of an objective or overriding notion of the good in modern liberal society; there are only goods, which are expressions of preferences. MacIntyre in particular makes this clear. Lawrence Schmidt also makes this point, arguing that the lack of any notion of the good is a foundational principle of liberalism:

Contractual liberalism is, therefore, dogmatically agnostic about what the good or the virtuous is. It simply brackets the question about the nature of the absolute good or the common good or the hierarchy of relative goods and puts it to one side. One may raise the question about the nature of goodness privately but one's private answer can have no public significance in a liberal society. A liberal regime must protect the freedom of its constituents to pursue their own ends; it has nothing to say about what those ends should be. (2008, 256)\(^3\)

\(^3\)It is worth noting that, much like the vision of a general technological utopia, there does exist a fairly vague yet overarching notion of the good in liberal society; but this is tied specifically to individual rights (which I will come back to in the Conclusion) and deliberately leaves wide scope for private notions of the absolute good (the most ready example being the enshrinement of the rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” in the U.S. Declaration of Independence). This vagueness is necessary for the enshrinement of both the myth of progress and the complete moral autonomy of the individual. Again, I should emphasize that though this may characterize liberalism, it is not the only way people understand the world, and the good (hence my argument for an environmental ethic as an alternative).
Again, we instead have the predominant moral theory of emotivism.

Notions of the good and other traditional moral categories are removed from the emotivist paradigm, and rendered meaningless by the technological system. States Ellul:

The technological system omits from its scope things that used to be the object of great concern by society (e.g., the identity of moral conducts). That is why we have to avoid posing the present-day problems in classical moral terms. For instance, to talk of liberty or responsibility in the technological system is meaningless. Those are moral terms that are incapable of taking man’s actual situation into account. It is, however, true that the technological system appears to give man a larger choice of possibilities – but exclusively within the technological range, and on condition that the choices bear upon technological objects and that this independence employs the technological instruments, i.e. expresses approval. (1980c, 109-110)

There are values that are standard to the technological system, but they are distinctly modern ones (in their interrelationship and exclusivity): “Normalcy, efficiency, success, work, professional conscience, devotion to a collective work – these are the principle values of the technical ethics on the basis of which all conduct is judged in our society” (Ellul 1980b, 205). “Utility” values – particularly rationality and efficiency – emphasized in Western society from around the 18th century formed the basis for the development of the technological phenomenon; but soon, argues Ellul, these very values were required by technique. As he states, “what had occasioned the technical phenomenon now became a demand of technique for continuing its own development” (2004, 34). These values, of course, are so ingrained that they are considered outside of ‘morality’ as we might ponder the category. Traditional morals, as mentioned, are pushed further and further into irrelevance (or subjugation) by technique.

Not only are traditional moral categories obsolete in assessing the technological system as such, perceived as morally neutral, but also the actions of the individual technicians. It is
pointless, Ellul argues, to introduce moral judgment only for what the technician does with technology (i.e., behaviour as it relates to application):

It is the same behavior that dictates the attitude of research (claiming it to be free of moral judgment) and the attitude of application. The technician who puts something to work claims to be as free as the scientist who does the research. Thus it is childish of an intellectual to bring morality into the consequences if he has rejected it in the principle. The autonomy of technology is established here chiefly by radical division of two areas: “each for itself” Morality judges moral problems. It has nothing to do with technological problems: only the technological means and criteria are acceptable. (1980c, 146)

A little later on in *The Technological System*, Ellul elaborates on the consequences of this on morality in general. To quote him in full:

“We are no longer in that primitive epoch when things were good or bad per se: things are only as man makes them. Everything boils down to him. Technology is nothing in itself.” But in formulating this oversimplification, the intellectual fails to realize that man is dependent on technology and that, since the latter has become free of all moral judgment, the above statement would imply precisely that technology could do anything. Man does what technology allows him to do. He has thus undertaken to do anything. Maintaining that morality should not judge invention or technological operation leads to saying, unwittingly, that any human action is beyond ethics. The autonomy of technology renders us amoral. Henceforth, morality will no longer be part of our domain, it will be shunted off into the void. In the eyes of scientists and technicians, morality – along with all values and what can be called humanism – is purely a private matter, having nothing to do with concrete activity (which can only be technological) and with no great interest in the seriousness of life. (146-147)

We can see clearly here the connection with what McIntyre and Taylor say about emotivist and procedural ethics respectively.

In a related argument, Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), contends that technique destroys the moral self. In his words:

The moral self is the most evident and the most prominent among technology’s victims. The moral self can not and does not survive fragmentation. In the world mapped by wants and pockmarked by hurdles to their speedy gratification, there is
ample room left for *homo ludens*, *homo economicus*, and *homo sentimentalis*; for gambler, entrepreneur, or hedonist – but none for the moral subject. In the universe of technology, the moral self with its negligence of rational calculation, disdain of practical uses and indifference to pleasure feels and is an unwelcome alien. (198)

Clearly Bauman has a particular version of the ‘moral self’ in mind, one more in line with a classical rather than modern understanding. His point, however, remains valid in light of Ellul’s analysis. With this specific notion in mind, Bauman continues by arguing that there is no ground on which to base morality in modernity. He states:

> The ‘modern movement’ pulverized any ground on which moral commandments can be conceivably founded – it undermined morality as such: responsibilities which go beyond contractual obligations, ‘being for’ non-reducible to ‘being for oneself,’ values interfering with the supreme concept of maximum efficacy, ends which forbid the use of potent means. Among the authorities which modernity empowers and promotes, the non-rational, non-utilitarian, non-profitable moral passions are most spectacularly absent. (219)

Again, as McIntyre indicates and as Bauman argues, whatever *is* left of moral subjectivity is incoherent. And again, this is fundamentally different from pre-modernity, and most notably the classical account. In agreement with McIntyre and Bauman, Schmidt states:

> The absence of a coherent account of moral subjectivity is perhaps one inevitable outcome of the enlightenment project. We lack a language by which to discern, in ethical terms, the right relationship of human beings to one another and to the natural order precisely because we are only able to conceive of the human subject in terms of an indeterminate range of possibilities. Which possibilities will be realized can only be determined by the creative exercise of the will. The reality of the human being, and thus of nature, is fluid and dynamic. Being is subordinated to becoming. And the Delphic injunction, “Know Thyself!”, which inaugurated the history of western reason has been answered within modernity by precisely this account of the self: as a set of possibilities to be realized, or not, through the exercise of creative willing. It goes without saying that this kind of answer is at an infinite remove from the spirit in which the meaning of the injunction was first pondered by those ancient Greeks among whom it was formulated. (2008, 288)

Such an understanding of the human subject has gone hand in hand with the development of
technique, now the primary determinant of the (limited) range and application of moral judgment.\(^4\)

As a result, philosophers and moralists become relevant only in their ‘areas of specialization.’ Even the general category of ‘ethics’ is so divided. As Schmidt argues, an analysis of debates within and between ‘sub-fields’ of ethics (business ethics, environmental ethics, biomedical ethics, etc.) reveals that “certain fundamental questions have been ignored and that, as in the fields of moral philosophy or political theory, there are no common ethical standards that are applied, and no means (in politics, the academy, the defense establishment, the health care system or the business world) of determining the superiority of a particular ethical approach” (272). Such atomism is too weak to offer resistance to technology. Says Ellul: “Technology, judging itself, is now liberated from what was once the main check on human action: beliefs (sacred, spiritual, religious) and ethics” (1980c, 148).

Further, as mentioned, in escaping moral judgment, technology itself becomes the judge: “Independent of morals and judgments, legitimate in itself, technology is becoming the creative force of new values, of a new ethics” (Ellul 1980c, 149). And this, of course, involves a denial of all limits. Ellul is adamant on this: “Technology in itself does away with limits. Nothing is impossible or prohibited for it. This is not an accessory or accidental feature, it is the very essence of technology” (1980c, 154). Elsewhere, he links this to power. As power increases, traditional values fall: “Any increase in power is always paid for by the questioning, the regression, or the surrender of [traditional] values” (1980b, 207). Again, this means a sense of

\(^4\)This is not to say there have not been efforts to establish global moral standards to which nations are subject; e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Geneva Conventions, etc. The moral and legal weight of these documents and treaties is debatable, however, and participation more voluntary than obligatory. The Kyoto Protocol was intended to be legally binding on signatories; yet, as is commonly known, the countries (including Canada) that have failed to meet agreed-upon conditions face no sanctions, legal or otherwise. I am not, however, suggesting that these efforts be abandoned; rather, that they are muted at best in liberal, technique-driven society.
limitlessness; with no external guideposts, everything is just ‘one more step.’ He explains:

The result of the destruction of [traditional] values is, first, that man becomes incapable of effectively judging and appraising his actions. At this point the rule that imposes itself comes to be: “All that can be done must be done.” Why not resort to torture or the concentration camp? There exists no predetermined limit, no objective limit. What is involved, every time, is just one more step. This is the permanent simultaneous escalation of power and demoralization. (207)

Out of this, one of Ellul’s final conclusions in System concerning ethics and spirituality is that “man in our society has no intellectual, moral, or spiritual reference point for judging and criticizing technology” (318). He continues a bit further on:

The nontechnological sacred, the nontechnological religious are eliminated. Thus, man has no place from which to evaluate the process. He has no possible “point of view.” If he thinks dialectically, technology is not one of the terms of his dialectics: it is the universe in which the dialectics operate. If he thinks religiously, he seeks primarily to make the new form of religion chime with his universe. (318)

This is despite the fact that choice is apparently the hallmark of technological society, and the rallying cry of its partisans. Like so many characteristics of modern liberal/technological ethics we have examined, it is championed under the banner of freedom. Yet, is this really freedom? Ellul asks a series of important questions concerning ‘choice’ in technological society: “Who is this man who is to choose? Is the choice autonomous? What does it bear upon? What is the influence of the technicians?” (319). All choices, he points out, “are made within the system, and nothing goes beyond it” (320). We are governed by a mode of behaviour based on our being technological beings in a technological system. States Ellul:

Naturally, modern man can choose from a hundred automobile makes and a thousand kinds of cloth – i.e., he can choose products. On the level of consuming, the range of choice is vaster. But on the level of the role in the body social, on the level of functions and behaviors, there is a considerable reduction. The choice

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Again, Ellul often refers to ethics and spirituality in the same breath.
among technological objects is not of the same nature as the choice of a human
count. There is no theoretical category of “choice” that would express freedom.
The word “choice” has no ethical content per se, and freedom is not expressed in
the choice of objects. (321)

As Ellul notes, ‘freedom’ in the technological system actually amounts to increasing control,
specifically of technicians: “What it comes down to is that technology increases the technician’s
freedom, i.e., his power, his control” (324). And again, judged entirely from within the system,
such power and control brooks no limit; the ideal is in fact the opposite.

We come then full circle to the lack of an external standard, a higher notion of the good,
that by nature stands outside of the technological system. Without it, we are limited to the
choices and values presented to us within the system. As Ellul states: “A critique requires an
outside reference point; one can criticize something only in accordance with a scale of values. If
one has no point of comparison, no scale of values, then obviously one can judge nothing” (2004,
73).

As a final point in this regard, however, we must be careful not to confuse the lack of a
traditional accounts of a higher good and human telos with the utter lack of any idea of a higher
good being served. The technological phenomenon originated from, and is still perpetuated by,
moral ideals defined in opposition to traditional ones. But the transition from postmodern to
modern is a complex one, and not a clean break; we saw this with McIntyre and Taylor. Ellul’s
lack of attention to the history of ideas and the development of moral theory (the realm of
philosophy, which he largely disdains) is in fact a weakness in his theory. Grant in particular
makes this point, in criticizing Ellul’s analysis (though he is otherwise deeply influenced by it):
“Ellul’s account of modernity seems to me to fail because it comes out of a type of Christianity
which scorns the discipline of philosophy . . . It seems to me Ellul’s writings about technology exactly show the failure of such a position. It fails to understand what technology truly is, because it refuses to come to terms with reason, except as a human instrument” (1978, 146). Grant claims that Ellul does not ask the basic question: “to what extent is modern technological society connected to, and a product of, the western interpretation of Christianity?” (146).

Specifically, Grant notes, the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian revelation is crucial to understanding the foundations of modernity (particularly, as Bernard Zylstra argues, in a synthesis of the two, the break-up of which has led to secular modernity) (148).6

Thus Grant argues (though in an earlier piece) that though it might seem that “the practical primal has become no more than the unalloyed drive to technological mastery for its own sake” (1969, 27), this analysis is incomplete. He argues that

this interpretation underestimates the very effectiveness of North America in the world, in its forgetting that it is men who make that drive. What makes the drive to technology so strong is that it is carried on by men who still identify what they are doing with the liberation of mankind. Our ruling managers are able to do what they do just because among sufficient of them technology and liberalism support each other as identified. It is this identification which makes our drive to technology still more dynamic than the nihilistic will to will which is emptied of all conceptions of purpose. (27)

In the end, Grant fundamentally agrees with Ellul’s conclusions about the nature of technique, but wants to ensure a closer reading of its origins, particularly in intellectual/moral history. We speak of modern ‘values,’ but as Grant notes, the very word ‘value’ comes from the crumbling of the European contemplative tradition in the face of modernization (the latter in

6Though I do not have the space to address this connection in detail here, Grant gives a nice account in his essay “In Defense of North America,” in Technology and Empire (1969). He draws on the more well-known accounts of Troeltsch and Weber.
reaction to the former), specifically Nietzsche:

For Nietzsche the fundamental experience for man was apprehending what is a chaos; values were what we creatively willed in the face of that chaos by overcoming the impotence of the will which arises from the recognition of the consequences of historicism. Nietzsche’s politics . . . stated that democracy and socialism were the last debasements brought into the world by Christianity as it became secularised. The universal and homogeneous state would be made up of ‘last men’ from whom nobleness and greatness would have departed. (38)

We have co-opted the language of values and filled it with the substantive morality of liberalism (such as it is), “that liberalism which sees the universal and homogeneous state as the highest goal of political striving” (39).

The inherent nihilism that accompanies the language of ‘values,’ argues Grant, has now corroded the substance of practical liberalism – for example, “the old individualism of capitalism, the frontier and Protestantism, becomes the demanded right to one’s idiosyncratic wants taken as outside any obligation to the community which provides them” – such that the effect is the “narrowing to an unmitigated reliance on technique” (39-40) which Ellul describes extensively.

As mentioned, I (along with many of the theorists I have drawn on) have been using the term ‘values’ somewhat unproblematically, with the assumption that the idea can be rescued from its nihilistic origins. It is fruitless to deny the modern moral ideal of individual autonomy; the modern “disengaged identity,” as Taylor states, is “far from simply being wrong and misguided, and besides, we are all too deeply imbued with it to be able really and authentically to repudiate it” (1985, 7). The notion of values as signposts of ethical orientation assumes such autonomy; and indeed, following Segundo, they are inherent to our creation of meaning-structures.

Rather than limiting our understanding and usage of the concept of ‘values’ to the Nietzschean context – and in order to opt for an alternative to liberal, emotivist, technical
interpretations – we must turn instead to some kind of hybrid with a resurrected Aristotelian
teleology, and a higher notion of the good. ‘Hybrid,’ because as Taylor points out (and as
McIntyre and Grant admit), there is much that is good in the ethics of modernity; none the least of
which are the ethics of authenticity and benevolence, as well as the notions of tolerance and
equality.

Ultimately, I am arguing that this ethic has been developed in the context of
environmentalism, and that it is the same impulse as the spiritual or religious; and this offers an
effective and crucial alternative to the predominant liberal ethic I have described. It is to this that
I turn in the final chapters.
I have presented in the preceding chapters a number of ideas pertaining to ethics, spirituality and environmentalism in modernity; some more obviously connected than others. I would argue that all, however, are necessary to attempt a more complete picture of the role of religion/spirituality in environmental ethics. As simple as the answer may have seemed from the outset, it is now clear that the matter is in fact enormously complex – though not, fortunately, completely impenetrable.

The previous chapter summarized and connected the theories of Segundo, MacIntyre, Taylor, and Ellul in an attempt to illumine some of the key, broad patterns that can be interwoven. What emerged was a picture of largely befuddled contemporary ethics, bound up in the predominant technological system. I now turn to linking this explicitly with the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon discussed in Chapter One, and how to understand environmentalism as a context for this link. In so doing, I will also return briefly to the participants in my fieldwork.

As shown in the previous chapter, there is a clear link between a missing overarching sense of purpose or telos, an agreed upon sense of higher standards or good, and technological, liberal materialism. Such materialism, and the inherent lack of depth of meaning, in turn can be easily connected to a growing movement of ‘seekers.’ While there is reason to speculate that this may be a significant cause in the upsurge of more charismatic or fundamentalist forms of religion, my concern is with those frustrated with the perceived rigidity and dogmatism of institutionalized
religion\textsuperscript{1}; in other words, with those who are ‘spiritual but not religious,’ or those who eschew either of these terms.

\textit{Fieldwork participants revisited}

Much of what I highlighted in Chapter One from participants’ accounts\textsuperscript{2} can now be more fully understood in light of the anthropological, philosophical, and sociological analyses of the theorists examined in the chapters that followed. In particular, I would like to return to the connection participants made, implicitly or explicitly, between ethics and spirituality.\textsuperscript{3} To again quote from a written response to the question “What do the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ mean to you?”:

I guess that you might conclude that when [I use] the terms spirituality or spiritual, the activities or people to which [I attach] those terms must be consistent with activities or people who [I deem] to be fundamentally ethical. I think that that is a correct conclusion. I am unsure whether this connection between the uses of these terms holds generally.

Though this was the only written response to make such a link explicit, it was more apparent in the less structured, in-person interviews. To quote Donna, speaking of the connection between being ‘spiritual’ and being ‘ethical’:

I don’t think you probably can be one without the other. I can’t imagine being a - not

\textsuperscript{1}It should be noted here, in light of the previous chapter in particular, that challenging the very real rigidity and dogmatism that has been part of all large, institutional religions is clearly one of the worthy aspects of post-Enlightenment critical thought. As we have seen, however, wholesale rejection of religious tradition has come at a price.

\textsuperscript{2}See also Appendix 1.

\textsuperscript{3}This connection is by no means unique to my fieldwork results and analysis. Commenting on her research in Britain on people claiming to be spiritual or religious without any involvement with formal religion, Kate Hunt says: “As we read the conversations, it becomes clear that there is a link between people’s understanding of spirituality and morality” (161).
being an ethical person. You know, not minding whether you stick it to somebody, throwing litter all over the floor, lying to people... I can’t imagine being that kind of person, and actually being a spiritual person. I think they do go hand in hand, very much.

Naturally, extrapolations from these kinds of statements are inherently limited because of the different ways people define and understand the term ‘spirituality.’ However, the point of connection here seems to be between being good and being spiritual. This is not to say that participants believe one must be spiritual in order to be a good person (though some may), but rather that they could not conceive of a morally bad person also being spiritual.

What tends to be associated with being ‘good’ and being ‘spiritual’ – particularly when the two are linked – is a developed self-awareness/reflection. In the environmental context, this development occurs with a broader acknowledgment of the natural world and our responsibility to it; in other words, something outside of or beyond our individual selves, or society as a whole. This can be a “higher force,” as referenced in one of the written responses: “If you are being spiritual, you are living your life while being conscious of some higher force, other than what is apparent to the naked eye.” Or for those less comfortable with more overtly religious or spiritual language, it can be an idea of “justice,” recognized by an innate sense of right and wrong.\(^4\) In both cases, being ‘ethical’ or ‘spiritual’ (or both) necessarily involves a cultivation of one’s inner sense of connection to, and responsibility toward something larger than oneself. Again, to quote a written response emphasizing all of these things: “Spirituality . . . encompasses a love and appreciation of nature, an emphasis on the positive and trying not to leave too large a footprint.” Or as Sharon commented with regard to science: “... I think the value system to guide science needs to come from outside science, it doesn’t have the ability to have kind of a overarching,

\(^4\)See in particular my interview with Pamela in the first appendix.
overriding value system . . .”

**Linking fieldwork to theory**

We are now in a position to see what this implies in light of the theories examined in the previous four chapters. Clearly, regardless of what language is specifically comfortable to them, all participants have in common respect for, and responsibility toward, non-human nature as a ‘hypergood’ (in Taylor’s terminology) or (at least part of) an ‘absolute value’ (in Segundo’s terminology). There is a more clearly defined relationship between this ‘faith’ and ideology (again, in Segundo’s usage); between ends and means. Further, these ends are at least in part determined outside of us; values are at least in part determined by the sheer existence of other forms of life in their interaction. In other words, as I pointed out earlier, ontology – *is* – is clearly linked to moral obligation – *ought*. And finally, though undoubtedly certain highly personal connections to nature and the feelings invoked by them are determinant of values, *all* participants (and, I would speculate, the majority of environmentalists) insist that the environment has inherent value that exists *regardless of the variances of individual feelings and opinions*.

All of these characteristics speak of a ‘spiritual ethic’ or ‘ethical spirituality’ (if these are not redundant terms) that is in clear opposition to the emotivist or procedural understandings of ethics, and to the imperatives of technique. The basic recognition of a standard of good that is outside of human manipulation that is *operative in our day to day decision-making* is at the heart of this opposition.

5See Sharon’s account in the first appendix. Again I should be clear that *most*, but not *all*, participants spoke in these or similar terms. One participant explicitly stated that ‘spiritual’ feelings “are a creation of the human mind rather than any reflection of reality.”
In pointing out the essential difference between ethics and spirituality, it can certainly be argued that spirituality is generally about asking deeper questions, reflecting on the nature of the cosmos and our place in it, while ethics more about action, with no metaphysical assumptions or attachments necessary. As Jeremy pointed out in our conversation, the more personal spiritual or religious commitments are not usually on the table when planning or executing environmental activism, because it would lead to discomfort, and possibly division. Moral positioning, on the other hand, is expected; shared values are the basis of communal action. As I have mentioned, spiritual matters tend to be considered personal (in this context), whereas shared values are part of the public domain.

In certain kinds of ethics, however, including Aristotelian and most traditionally religious ones, there is an assumed place in the cosmos for humans, and behind our decisions is the desire to orient ourselves to the higher good; in other words, as we have seen, teleology. This does and need not mean that our ends are predetermined, but simply that there are ends, that we do have a higher purpose, though we may disagree on (or have no idea about) what this ultimate purpose is, and by what ‘force’ or Creator this is determined, if any. A basic teleological ethic, though, connected to a sense of the good and a desire to orient toward it, is I think the kind of ethic many environmentalists (perhaps unavoidably) espouse. Though one can, presumably, hold green values but believe them to be completely arbitrary – or perhaps more commonly, that they are entirely the product of a biological survival instinct and nothing more – my fieldwork experience and broad reading of environmental literature indicates to me that for most environmentalists this is simply not the case. Not only is it a philosophically tenuous position – as Segundo, MacIntyre

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6See Jeremy’s account in the first appendix.
and Segundo each shows in his own way — but more importantly, such an ethic fails to satisfy a sense of higher meaning so clearly sought by the many ‘seekers’ of modern society, particularly in the face of perceived meaninglessness of materialist, technological pursuits. This may explain the broader appeal of ‘spirituality,’ even if the word itself carries connotations that remain uncomfortable to an avowed secularist. As John Cottingham argues: “Even the most convinced atheist may be prepared to avow an interest in the ‘spiritual’ dimension of human existence, if that dimension is taken to cover forms of life that put a premium on certain kinds of intensely focused moral and aesthetic response, or on the search for deeper reflective awareness of the meaning of our lives and of our relationship to others and the natural world” (2005, 3).

This relates to the discussion of ‘secular spirituality’ in Chapter One. Interestingly, in his introduction to the volume *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, Van Ness points to MacIntyre’s retrieval of Aristotelian virtue ethics as of central importance to the notion of secular spirituality. He argues that

> Alasdair MacIntyre has provided a theory of virtue that includes a notion of practice quite relevant to the discussions of spiritual life . . . Among the practices cited by MacIntyre are scientific inquiry, musical artistry, and expertise at games like chess. All of these are likewise mentioned in this volume as examples of activities that may be accorded a spiritual significance; that is, they may bear the special meaning of relating their practitioners to the world as a cosmic whole and thereby transforming them in the direction of enhanced vitality. (1996, 6)

He continues a bit further on: “When appropriated for the description of spiritual practices, MacIntyre’s definition has the felicitous implication that such practices are not deemed good because they earn some otherworldly reward” (5-6). In other words, they are not salvific, as they would be in the context of most traditional religions (6). In this sense, MacIntyre’s notion of practice preserves the spiritual and secular dimensions.
Not all those studying the ‘spiritual but not religious’ phenomenon are so quick to include secular activities, at least at first glance. Robert Fuller, for example, distinguishes “unchurched spirituality” from “secular interests”:

It is not sufficient for beliefs or practices to function like a religion for us to consider them spiritual. Many secular activities meet some of the social and psychological needs often associated with religion (providing a sense of meaning, fostering inner satisfaction, building community) . . . Although such spiritual activities may function like a religion, they lack a distinctively spiritual quality. (2001, 8)

He instead adopts William James’ distinction between spiritual and the secular orientation, the criteria for which “help us eliminate many secular interests and activities that can become all-absorbing yet lack any concern with a larger reality” (8).

The notion of “larger reality,” however, is vague. As we have seen, in non-relativist ethics, we are dealing with systems, values, and meanings with an implicit larger reality. Further, Fuller in fact does seem to allow for secular definitions by saying that in addition to when we ask more traditional religious questions, such as “where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die,” we “become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world” (8-9). Even more interestingly, he has an article in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, where he seems to argue the opposite of what he states in the passage quoted above. He in fact approvingly presents Tillich’s early notion of secular spirituality: “Tillich urged us to view religion not as a separate component of human existence but rather as the dimension of depth in all human endeavours” (1996, 227). He continues:

Tillich’s definition of religion as “ultimate concern” sensitizes us to the fact that authentic spirituality is not confined to the life of theological institutions. It is
instead the response to what, at the level of its deepest mystery, is the creative reality and ultimate significance of our lives. Spirituality is thus a mode of human thought and feeling that can be found in any human experience that prompts encounter with the ultimate ground of existence. (227)\(^7\)

Vagueness of terms aside, Fuller does seem to be agreeing with Tillich’s basic point that being spiritual is fundamental to being human, and though we perhaps deny it in secular society, it can be manifested in non-(traditionally) religious ways. Quoting Tillich directly:

> Our period has decided for a secular world. That was a great and much-needed decision . . . It gave consecration and holiness to our daily life and work. Yet it excluded those deep things for which religion stands: the feeling for the inexhaustible mystery of life, the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence, and the invincible power of an unconditional devotion. These things cannot be excluded. (cited in Fuller, 228)\(^8\)

It is exactly this that I am relating to teleological ethics, and which I think can be identified in environmentalism. I do not wish to impose too much of my own interpretation or analysis on the words of the participants I interviewed, but I do not feel that such an interpretation is inconsistent with what many of the participants attempted to communicate; sometimes haltingly, for lack of an easy language to use outside of a traditionally religious lexicon.

**The role of the individual**

Through all the various threads I am trying to connect – in general, contemporary understandings of religion/spirituality and ethics in the context of environmentalism – much seems to hinge on the role of the *individual*, and the connection of the individual to a larger community

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7 This is echoed in the work of other theologians, such as Karl Rahner.

8 One must bear in mind, of course, the problematization of the terms ‘secular’ and ‘secularization,’ as discussed in Chapter One.
or tradition. How do we understand and evaluate this role? I will examine this starting from two inescapable facts of individualism in modernity, as relevant here, that have emerged from this examination.

The first is that despite the continued influence of communal/shared values, ethics are generally accepted as the confluence of personal preference (emotivism) and social contract theory. Our moral inclinations are solely the product of biology and culture, but as social animals we must agree upon rules in order to live together. This has led to widespread acceptance of universalist moral theories such as utilitarianism and neo-Kantianism. This understanding is intimately linked to technique, and is particularly vulnerable to it (particularly in the form of applied science) as determinant of action or ‘progress.’

Such an interpretation has been critiqued at length, and we must acknowledge within it the important place of the modern, autonomous individual as an assumption and ideal. There is no question that such autonomy can lead (and has led) to ethical relativism. Bibby notes that younger people in particular have a more relativistic attitude toward ethics: “No less than 65% of teens agree with the statement ‘What’s right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion’” (2002, 217). He continues: “What seems to be happening here is that young people in particular are increasingly interpreting values and morality in a very individualistic rather than a communal manner. Their values tend to be derived from what they’ve experienced personally, rather than from broader systems such as religion, which define what is ethical or moral in terms of the collective good” (217).9

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9This could, on the other hand, be a function of age; cf. Fowler, who builds on Piaget’s stage theory of cognitive development.
Further, as many authors have pointed out, modern individualism has been expressed most emphatically in the notion of rights. This too has been critiqued, as we have seen with MacIntyre; also, perhaps most notably by Simone Weil. As Weil argues: “The notion of rights is linked with the notion of sharing out, of exchange, of measured quantity. It has a commercial flavor, essentially evocative of legal claims and arguments. Rights are always asserted in a tone of contention; and when this tone is adopted, it must rely upon force in the background, or else it is laughed at” (1986, 81). Thanks to this idea, she says, “what should have been a cry of protest from the depth of the heart has been turned into a shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims, which is both impure and unpractical” (84). Rights, in Weil’s view, are bound to existence and reality, the this-worldly; obligations, on the other hand, which are “always and everywhere good” (86), belong to a realm situated above all conditions.

Though important to realize the problematic consequences of modern individualism, Taylor reminds us that it is equally important to resist a dismissal of the disengaged or punctual self, and what he calls the ethic of authenticity, as worthless or evil. Although the relativism that results from a culture of self-fulfilment “is a profound mistake, even in some aspects self-stultifying” (Taylor 1991, 15), something Alan Bloom (1987) in particular laments (see also Bell 1979 and Lasch 1991), it is not the sole or inevitable consequence of this ethic. According to Taylor, a sense of community, and connection to it, need not be sacrificed. Modern individualism need not result in atomism: “Modern individualism, as a moral idea, doesn’t mean ceasing to

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10 Taylor, for one, provides an insightful analysis in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (see the first chapter in particular), and of course in *Sources of the Self*.

11 A notion Taylor traces to Locke.
belong at all – that’s the individualism of anomie and breakdown – but imagining oneself as belonging to ever wider and more impersonal entities: the state, the movement, the community of humankind” (Taylor 2004, 160).

Further, such an interpretation of modern individualism ignores the positive aspect; the empowerment of the individual. The individual has the power to resist in a way the collective cannot. The resistance can in fact be of the technological system, despite its overwhelming influence. Ellul himself admits that his original analysis in *The Technological Society* applies to the collective rather than the individual: “. . . I have tried to perform a work of sociological reflection, involving analysis of large groups of people and of major trends, but not of individual actions” (1964, xxviii). He adds later in his Foreword: “It is not possible for me to treat the individual sphere. But I do not deny that it exists” (xxix). Instead, as mentioned, he explores the milieu in which the individual operates. “Thus,” he says in *System*, “in describing the system, I do not exclude the initiatives and choices of individuals, but only the possibility that everything boils down to them. I do not offer ‘what takes place,’ ‘what is,’ but what man modifies, accelerates, disturbs, etc.” (87).

Of course, he inevitably does treat the individual sphere, at least in part, particularly in later works (and especially in his theological writings). Within the technological milieu, small groups and individuals are still somewhat empowered: “While crowds of people adopt all the technical developments, we can act only on individual levels” (Ellul 2004, 65). He in fact emphasizes the need for “mutants”:

> Not the mutants of science fiction – the technical human being with a robot’s brain – but quite the opposite. To be a mutant a person needs to become someone who can use techniques and at the same time not be used by, assimilated by, or
subordinated to them. This implies a development of the intellect and a development of consciousness which can come about only for individuals, but it is the only development possible. (66)

This is an extraordinarily important point in light of the oppressive reality of technique he so painstakingly and accurately exposes; all the more so that it is made by Ellul himself.

Despite the problematic aspects of ethical relativism and the culture of emotivism stemming from the ideal of the autonomous modern individual, sprung free of the trappings of religious determinism, Aristotelian teleology, and natural law, there is obviously still value in the ethic of self-fulfilment and authenticity, particularly in the empowerment of individuals (and small organizations or communities) to resist the disastrous impacts of technique. This, again, points to the crucial importance of environmental and other social justice groups.

The second inescapable fact of individualism in modernity, clearly related to the first, is that religiosity has become for many a hybrid of different rituals and beliefs, leading to a growing sense of individualized, personalized ‘spirituality’ as the norm. Like ethical individualism, religious/spiritual individualism has serious pitfalls.

First of all, though technique causes a void in human meaning that many yearn to fill (including through a search for spirituality), Ellul points out that the technological system itself is quick to do so. He explains:

When modern man, because of his life in this society, loses a profound force, a wellspring of vitality, a motivation, and no longer knows how to act by virtue of that basic reason, a reason for action and meaning, when he is so lackluster that he has no more purchase on the outside world, then, automatically, a technology is born to allow indispensable action despite everything. This action, becoming more efficient, is therefore easier and requires no such great motivations, no such total judgment, no such full effort . . . We can posit as a consistent and permanent feature that when man loses a deep reason for acting, a technology appears that allows him to act in the same area, but without any reason. The means has entirely
replaced the meaning. (1980c, 254)

To be sure, this is not ultimately satisfying, because no *real* meaning exists; a technological quick-fix replacement, however, becomes all the more appealing when traditional religious or spiritual frameworks are abandoned.

It is either this, argues Ellul, or *compensation* for technique. As mentioned earlier, humans, he says, are not actually equipped to exist in a purely technical, cold universe; we are fundamentally *irrational*. “It was a tragic error of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” argues Ellul, “to believe that people were originally rational beings and that all irrationality must be suppressed. Each person is a creature of passions, of flesh and blood, a creature of impulses and desires. Hence, when a person lives in a purely rational framework, it is impossible to be happy” (2004, 39). Technique suppresses the subject as well as meaning. Thus, we compensate, in areas such as politics, art, and most relevant for my purposes here, religion. On this last, he says:

> We know that there has been a sudden development of religious phenomena. Personally, I do not believe that this development comes (if one is Christian) from the Holy Spirit. It is quite comprehensible, from a purely sociological viewpoint, in light of technique. Life in our technique-dominated world is extremely frustrating and extremely distressing, so we have to escape it. Religion appears as a means of escape. That is why religion is taking the forms that we now witness, the forms of spiritualism, and the extremely ardent, extremely intense forms of pietism, through which people can separate themselves totally from the world. Technique is coming to dominate the material world, and we are subject to the material world. But we can compensate by way of religious escape, by way of spiritual escape. (44)

It is clear that Ellul is less than enthusiastic about such forms of religion/spirituality (speaking of them as “escape” mechanisms, and not “from the Holy Spirit”). Though as we saw earlier, there

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12In particular, I need not detail the threats of fundamentalist forms of religion here.
remains room for genuine resistance at the individual level, the risk in our technological age is to fall into either imitation of technique, or reactionary (and ultimately unhelpful) compensation for it; individualized spirituality is potentially of this nature.¹³

A similar point is made from a slightly different angle by Carrette and King in Selling Spirituality, where they highlight and criticize the corporate “takeover” of individualized forms of religion or spirituality, as I mentioned in Chapter One. Spirituality has become a commodity, they argue, and a valuable one: “From feng shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, from Christian mystics to New Age gurus, spirituality is big business” (1). Such commodification creates a ‘spirituality’ that hardly resists materialism, but rather participates in it.

Despite these pitfalls of individualized spirituality, there are obviously real positives as well, as was seen for example in the deeply engaged environmental spirituality of some of the fieldwork participants. This kind of ‘engaged’ spirituality is ultimately what Carrette and King wish to retrieve in place of the shallow, commodified versions. Though not claiming to harken back to an ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ form of spirituality – in fact several times emphasizing they are not – the authors are obviously putting forward a conception of ‘higher’ or in some way ‘better’ (or simply ‘good’) spirituality:

This project is not motivated, as some who may misread our work may assume, in order to appeal to some privileged space of ancient religious authenticity, some nodal point where ‘true religion’ or ‘true spirituality’ might be found – for this has not been our concern. Nevertheless, in challenging the colonisation of our collective cultural heritage by individualist and capitalist forms of spirituality, we

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¹³One must understand this in the context of Ellul’s theology. For him, Revelation must come from something wholly other, rather than as a result of our sociological need to compensate for lack of meaning; the latter is what we most often mean by ‘religion.’ Christian Revelation is thus for him the opposite of religion (2004, 77). It has been ‘reduced’ to religion in particular because of technique: “The deformation of Revelation and faith into ‘Christianity’ has always occurred. At the moment, however, it is more serious than ever because of technique” (80).
have inevitably emphasised what they have silenced within those traditions, namely a concern with community, social justice and the extension of an ethical ideal of selfless love and compassion towards others. (171)

Rather than offering a version of ‘real’ spirituality, the authors see themselves as challenging the dominant capitalist discourse of power through a defence (or recovery) of the concept of spirituality as “alter-mondialiste”: “We seek . . . to support a counter-discourse, grounded in an emphasis upon social justice and compassion, in order to displace the privatised neo-liberal framing of ‘spirituality’ and offer a corrective to the dominant trends that have emerged within the ‘Mind, Body, Spirit’ sphere” (172). 14 Genuine personal and social transformation for the better can indeed result from a thoughtful and self-aware spirituality; this, in turn, can offer resistance to corporate (and technological) society.

Thus, as we can see, the role of the individual is indeed large in the culture of modernity, both ethically and spiritually. In important ways, modern individualism represents an inevitable part of technical, emotivist, liberal culture, helping to perpetuate it; in equally important ways, it is the locus of resistance to this culture. How can we solve this apparent dilemma? In the context of this project specifically: Can an environmental ethic/spirituality, espoused by the individual environmentalist but shared in a larger community, offer a real alternative to the predominant culture, one that more fully reflects the nature of humanity? If so, how? It is to this, and to my final thoughts, that I turn in the Conclusion.

14 ‘Mind, Body, Spirit’ is what the authors use to refer to the packaged, commodified, individualized notion of spirituality in liberal (and in fact “neo-liberal”) discourse.
Conclusion

In bridging the discussion from the previous chapter, it is useful, I think, to re-emphasize the fact that Segundo, MacIntyre, Taylor and Ellul each understands the role of the individual inevitably within the context of a larger community. Segundo speaks of the importance of a cultural tradition of referential witnesses, so we need not ‘start from scratch’ in the formulation of meaning-structure (faith). MacIntyre speaks of historically contingent traditions, each with its own base concepts of rationality and justice, yet constantly evolving (and indeed surviving) in dialogue with others. Taylor’s slightly different conception of the social imaginary is based on a shared social vision, and in particular a modern moral order that may still have room for the transcendent. And finally, though Ellul is rightfully wary of a collectivity, even he understood the importance of connecting with a community of like-minded individuals; his own resistance to technique and capitalization was never as a lone maverick, but as a part of smaller cells or organizations.

As we saw in the previous chapter, a central question that emerges is how to conceptualize the relationship of the autonomous modern individual to a ‘higher’ framework of the good, including responsibility toward non-human nature; both are part of an environmental ethic. As MacIntyre, Taylor and Grant all point out, suggesting that there might be a place for ‘higher’ notions of the good, including perhaps the religious/spiritual, in the operations of society (rather than simply the private sphere) is equated with stifling the freedom of the individual, the autonomous moral agent. After all, we broke free of the shackles of natural law over two centuries ago.

Both Taylor and MacIntyre agree on this challenge to the pretense of moral-neutrality in
the name of emotivism/naturalism, though Taylor, as we saw in his critique of MacIntyre, emphasizes that we must acknowledge genuine sources of virtue and morality in general alongside of a critique of modern bureaucratic society. I will return to this in a moment. Taylor’s discussion, and outright rejection, of procedural ethics demonstrates his commitment to the idea of higher good (including, perhaps, *the* good), which is denied when the focus is on *how* the rational agent thinks (*procedure*) rather than getting at substantive truth. As Taylor argues, we make qualitative distinctions between goods, judgments of worth; this makes us fundamentally ethical beings who cannot but function in accordance to some higher goods.

Further, Taylor’s theory of hypergoods leaves open the possibility of being ethically motivated by that which transcends humanity. We have already seen with Segundo that that which transcends our *experience*, at the very least, is necessary to the creation of meaning-structure (*faith*).

MacIntyre rejects Taylor’s acceptance of the *plurality* of goods; however, some clarification here is required. There is a distinction between the notion of a plurality of goods as relativistic, under the naturalist/emotivist model, and the plurality of goods as Taylor’s reading of Aristotle (which MacIntyre disagrees with), whereby goods are defined by qualitative distinctions, distinctions of worth. This does not preclude the idea that there is *the* good; pursuance of goods and the good way of life generally, in Taylor’s reading of Aristotle, reflects *and* is constitutive of the good.

Returning to Taylor’s affirmation of some elements of modern morality, one of his key points, particularly concerning MacIntyre’s complete rejection of modern forms of morality, is the compatibility of the ideal/ethic of authenticity with demands from outside the self. True
authenticity (and self-fulfilment) demands outside standards of significance. As I mentioned earlier, it is easy to see why this is important for environmental ethics; outside standards of significance can be located outside of humanity. One can be ‘true to oneself’ in the way described by Taylor without shunning the non-human world. Here we have an example of an enshrined element of modernity that need not be rejected. Something similar holds true for the place of instrumental reason in the ethic of practical benevolence.

We can also here see a key to understanding the direction of religion/spirituality in modernity, and its connection to ethics. Much of what we value about secularism relates to Taylor’s ethic of authenticity, in that the search for meaning, rather than being structured and delivered in a prescribed, organized form, is now an intensely individual quest, though we are bequeathed religious and philosophical values from generations past. Transcendent space, as Taylor notes, is now less “vertical” than it is “horizontal,” manifested in our social imaginaries. Again, however, outside standards of significance are implied and demanded, even if we do not locate and celebrate them in traditionally religious ways. None of this implies the irrelevance of such traditions in contemporary society; rather, the account we have arrived at leaves room for a genuine ‘secular spirituality’ of the kind explored initially in Chapter One.

Taylor in fact proposes a third option between belief in transcendent power and complete lack of belief in such power, rejected in favour of faith in human reason; faith in the inherent good of a goal beyond human flourishing (e.g. the good of nature) that is not linked to the supernatural. I agree with this, but it is curious that he links this with deep ecology specifically (2007, 9 and 19); I argue that this is much more broadly characteristic of environmental ethics. I concur with his understanding of secularity as a context in which “acknowledgment of the transcendent or of
goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing” can no longer be taken for granted, as in the past (2007, 21); but this, to me, underscores the importance of embracing such a position voluntarily, within modern society, and particularly within technological society.

In any case, modern ethics, embedded though they are in a liberal, technological context, need not be irretrievable; if anything, it is our understanding that is flawed, in that we do not recognize the implications of our own ethical frameworks. We are fundamentally oriented beings, whether ethically, spiritually, religiously, or some combination of these, depending on our specific definitions; the impulse is the same, and ever-present, try as we might to convince ourselves otherwise. As Eliade convincingly argues, religious/spiritual behaviour revolves around orienting ourselves toward the good (the sacred), which has ontic status, beyond us as individual agents and collective society. This can be confusingly understood and expressed in clumsy modern moral language; but as Taylor shows, it holds true nonetheless, and we need not necessarily turn exclusively to pre-modernity for acceptable expression of this impulse.

If we accept the more positive picture of modern morality that Taylor presents, how do we assess the role of MacIntyre’s traditions? As we saw, his notion of a tradition allows for the evolution of moral frameworks, and hence social change. This is important for remaining a socially engaged individual. But does this make sense in the wider context of increasingly globalized society? Can we consider the environmental movement a tradition? Though we may somewhat selectively pull from MacIntyre and Segundo’s theories of a tradition in characterizing the environmental movement, particularly when it comes to historically contingent notions of rationality and justice, it must not be at the expense of isolating it from the wider global community (or, indeed, from the connection to a notion of the good transcendent of it). Taylor’s
insight is again helpful in this regard, particularly relating to social imaginaries; we are bound together at least in part by shared social visions. Our modern notion of moral order, having broken free from the idea of it being grounded in transcendent hierarchical order, is now defined primarily by *citizenship*; again, this is the more ‘positive’ side of individualism. Although in many cases it has done so, this does not necessarily lead to a subsequent rejection of the basing of ethics in the transcendent generally. A hierarchical social order is not implied by all notions of the good.

Ultimately, MacIntyre’s notion of a tradition may help us make historical sense of the evolution of ideas, and may even make sense in terms of the moral locus of the individual (though in this sense the truth is probably closer to Segundo’s characterization), but it cannot escape an unacceptable relativism in terms of how traditions with different truth claims are to interact within an ‘über’ tradition such as liberalism. Taylor’s account, it seems to me, comes closer to the truth; and it allows for progression of society as a whole, which of course is one of the driving motivations of environmentalism. Social imaginaries can be altered over time; our sense of moral order can perhaps, as mentioned, be broadened to include non-human nature. Or, in Segundo’s terms, a tradition of referential witnesses whose absolute values include responsibility to non-human nature can be developed (possibilities which, admittedly, both run the risk of being usurped by the propaganda of the technical system, if we understand *responsibility* as efficient technical *control*).

MacIntyre is more useful in *specific* prescriptions for moral theory, and in fact morality in general. It seems that the answer, for MacIntyre, is to rescue some idea of teleology in our modern moral conceptions. This need not contradict the insights of both Segundo and Taylor.
MacIntyre talks about a return to virtue theory; Taylor talks about a return to substantive rather than procedural ethics. Do environmental ethics have the scope for this?

Taylor correctly links our loss of teleology with our disengagement from the world; a recapturing of a sense of teleology would then, it would seem, be linked to a re-engagement with the world. By this I do not mean simply ‘getting back to nature’; I mean what Taylor and Heidegger talk about in our fundamentally moral engagement with the world/cosmos we are a part of. It is not neutral, and neither are our modes of interaction and control. Who we are is in large part (perhaps wholly) determined by how we confront the world, but also how it confronts us; and this, following Taylor, necessarily involves strong evaluation. In turn, I would argue, a sense of what is worth pursuing is linked to an Aristotelian – or more generally, teleological – account of humanity, and to an idea of the virtues. We have successfully blinded ourselves to the fact, but we exist in a universe of operative goods, including perhaps (as Segundo says) an idea of absolute good, which may be linked with the transcendent. This also means that we have an idea of who we are and where we need to be; in other words, of ends.

Environmental ethics, I contend, have the potential (in many cases actualized) to provide a clearer language and framework for this, though of course being very much a product of modernity. There is a clear idea of ‘higher’ ways of life, of the good (and goods perhaps that lead to and constitute it). There is, whether articulated or not, a rejection of mechanistic thinking, particularly in the recognition of the intrinsic worth of non-human nature. Is is clearly linked to ought; the demand that nature makes on us, by its very existence, is that we respect it, and where necessary preserve and protect it.

If it has not been made obvious by now, I should clarify that when speaking of
environmental ethics I have had in mind mainly those that would be considered ‘secular’ (or ‘secular spiritual’), primarily because of my work with the SCC. An explicitly religious environmental ethic – or, otherwise stated, an environmental ethic from a traditionally/explicitly religious perspective – may in some instances be more straightforwardly teleological. If it is God’s will for humans to care for the planet, for instance, or if it is a part of Divine Law, this is an unquestionable articulation of the good and a vision of how we ought to achieve it. I believe that ‘secular’ environmentalism, however, has much in common with traditionally religious viewpoints, stemming from an explicit (or even, often, implicit) connection to something which transcends human life, or the mundane life in general, yet imposes on us in some way, and orient us. Again, this may be fruitfully understood as a form of spirituality, but one not bound to a particular faith narrative.

Above all, what emerges as crucial from the analyses of each of these thinkers (particularly Ellul), a notion I have repeatedly come to, is the necessity of limit. Depending on the context of his writing, Ellul draws on both a theological and non-theological account of limit. The former position can be seen particularly in “The Relationship between Man and Creation in the Bible,” where he argues that whatever mastery humans were given over nature was never intended to be unlimited, and that we have the responsibility to respect God’s limits to our exploitation of animals and the natural environment (this is clearly in line with contemporary ‘stewardship’ theology). In “Nature, Technique, and Artificiality,” on the other hand, he talks about the voluntary orientations of “recognition and limit.” With the first orientation, he means “recognitions of the real, of our past which remains inviolable, of multiple aspects of reality, recognition of the other as well as recognition of nature” (1980a, 281). The second is “the
attempt to find and set voluntary limits on action” (281); as such, “to refuse both the temptation to unlimitedness . . . and the identification of freedom with the disappearance of limits” (282).

It is important to note, particularly for those (including environmentalists) who speak strictly of our need to observe natural limits, that Ellul agrees with Ivan Illich’s distinction between natural thresholds (points beyond which we threaten our own survival) and limits, voluntarily and deliberately set by humans on culture. The latter are the only genuine counter to the acceleration of the technological system. In an important (yet footnoted) passage, Ellul comments: “It is by establishing voluntary limits that man sets himself up as man. The sole act of authentic, verifiable, and concrete control of technology would be to set limits to its development. But this is the very contradiction of the system. Contrary to what people may think, setting limits creates freedom” (1980c, 355 n.13).

As mentioned earlier, Ellul links freedom to limit, particularly the reduction of power, elsewhere. Again, in a non-theological context, he argues that given the lack of an accepted objective scale of values, we must strive for an “ethics of nonpower”; consciously rejecting (some of) what we are capable of doing (1980b, 208). To willingly set such limits is to be free: “The setting of limits (which correspond to what formerly was ‘sacred’) is the specific characteristic of freedom” (209). This will, he says, lead to tensions and (constructive, dialectic) conflicts, but that is welcome as exactly opposite to the monism of technique.

The notion of limit is clearly part of any environmental ethic; at least, environmental ethics that go further than simply calling for more technology, of a ‘greener’ kind (which can only misleadingly be called ‘environmentalism’). It is in the face of our overwhelming power and mastery over nature and reckless technological progressivism that most environmentalists call for
a scaling back, in order to halt the already widespread exploitation and destruction of nonhuman nature.

Ellul also links the ethics of nonpower to *transgression*; not breaking old taboos, as the term normally implies, but transgressing against technique itself, its myths and imperatives. He explains:

> Transgression against technique will consist in destroying man’s belief in it and in reducing technique to nothing but the production of aleatory and insignificant objects. It therefore will imply the search for an external meaning in the name of which transgression takes place and which, by this very act, does away with the very significance of technique. (1980b, 212)

Again, we come to the empowered resistance of individuals within communities. Some forms of traditional religion can no doubt still fulfil this role; but environmentalism is perhaps a more modern form of such transgression, one that manifests the changing nature of both religiosity and ethics.

Setting voluntary limits thus involves “the invention of an ethics allowing man to situate himself and live in the world he has made for himself” (Ellul 1980a, 282), and such an invention is the “one and only possibility for man to resolve the problem posed [by the endangerment of the natural environment]” (282). For Ellul personally, this must be supplemented by a *completely* transcendent order or standard to which we are obligated; in other words, God, and God’s will as revealed in Christian scripture. He in fact rather baldly states in one article: “I am completely clear in this regard – the devastation of the world, the ecological disaster that awaits us, is not only a result of belief in the technological system, but it follows, above all, from the fact that man no longer believes in the creator God, who is the God of Jesus Christ” (1984a, 151). While one may disagree with the latter part of this statement, his larger point is that a transcendent reference
point is crucial to a deeper notion of limit. He is not the only one to link this to God; Segundo, MacIntyre, and Taylor are (or were, in Segundo’s case) all Christians, and Grant states the idea of limit is “unavoidably the idea of God” (1995, 73).

The question, then, remains – and is crucial in light of many environmentalists’ rejection of traditional theological frameworks, including many of the fieldwork participants: Can we ground a higher standard of good in something other than a traditional account of God? Ultimately, the answer to this may be beyond the scope of this project. What I have endeavoured to show is that we can – and in fact do, in the environmentalist context – operate with an ethic/spirituality that is based in something outside human manufacture.

Does this challenge our autonomy as individuals, or the social progress we make? Is this inevitably an attempt to reintroduce some notion of natural law? We must remember that in our Enlightenment break with pre-modern conceptions of the universe, we also (for the most part) did away with genuinely oppressive theologies that justified radical social inequality as the Divine Order, and enjoyed an unprecedented advancement of knowledge. But as we have seen, there was a heavy cost. As mentioned, Grant asks the basic question in Philosophy in the Mass Age: Can some aspect of natural law – namely, the concept of limit outside human contrivance – be reconciled with what he calls the “history-making spirit” of modernity? To again quote his words: “Can the achievements of the age of progress be placed at the service of a human freedom that finds itself completed and not denied by a spiritual order?” (69).

Obviously, any dogmatic assertion about the ‘truth’ of a particular metaphysical or

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15Interestingly, in the introduction to a later edition of the book, Grant admits that his faith in any positives of progress and the history-making spirit has been shaken by reading Ellul’s account of technique. Nonetheless, I believe his basic question still holds.
cosmological explanation will be critiqued; rightly so, if we look at the history of any such
dogmatic assertions and the intolerance and conflict they entail. And, whether we like it or not,
modernity (or post-modernity) is pluralistic. Yet this need not mean relativistic. Must we define
the specific nature of a transcendent notion of the good in order to be bound by it? Can we not,
in fact, dialogue openly about the nature of the good, in the classical style, while at minimum
agreeing that we are responsible to something other than ourselves? In fact, we do –
environmentalists in particular – make such assumptions regularly, though always against the
prevailing discourse of technique and emotivism, cloaked as it is in the pretense of value-
neutrality.

Ultimately, as Cottingham points out, serving – or at least acknowledging – a higher
power or good in our search for meaning and grounding of ethics need not mean relinquishing our
autonomy: “‘Thy will be done’ is a way of focusing on the objective moral order towards which
our lives need to be oriented if they are to have value and meaning. And the prayer is not to lose
sight of that order in some blind act of servility but rather to remain in touch with that order, and
to ask that it may be fulfilled in our lives” (2005, 45). Cottingham believes that a theistic position
more naturally sustains a “domain of eternal and necessary value” through the concept of divine
will (56), but I think what he says holds true of an ethic or spirituality that, though not necessarily
theistic, does acknowledge a higher good. What is good is not decreed by a higher power, but
emerges from a teleology bound to this power.

This understanding of the place of transcendence in ethics brings us back to the notion of
secular spirituality. Margaret Somerville, in her published 2006 Massey Lectures The Ethical
Imagination, explores the possibility (and necessity) of a shared basis of ethics, rooted in the
“secular sacred” and “adopting a basic presumption in favour of the natural as the starting point”

(2). While fully aware of the usual modern suspicion placed on the ‘spirit’ as a genuine source of truth and guidance (as opposed to – or complementary to – instrumental reason empirically verifiable facts), Somerville insists, as I have been insisting, that there is a necessary connection between spirituality and morality. She understands spirituality as

a natural, inherent characteristic common to all humans, which some express through religious belief and practice, and others express in secular ways . . . It is the intangible, immeasurable, numinous reality that all of us need to find meaning in life and to make life worth living – a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or connectedness to all life, especially other people, to the world, and to the universe in which we live. (7-8)

She further explains that “one manifestation of the human spirit or spirituality is the longing for transcendence – the strong desire to experience the feeling of belonging to something larger than ourselves” (8). A notion of the secular sacred, which encourages participation in and experience of the transcendent while at the same time emerging because of our longing for it, can link traditionally religious and non-religious people who share a sense of external moral standards.

This, as I have argued, is observable in environmental ethics. Somerville clearly agrees:

Indeed, one place where we might find the secular sacred operating is in the environmental protection movement, some aspects of which mirror those of a religion. The movement functions through shared “truths” and ideology, and the bonding that results from sharing those beliefs; it causes people to focus on a reality external to themselves; it provides an opportunity for transcendence – belonging to and protecting something larger than oneself; its adherents demonstrate a willingness to make sacrifices and to suffer to promote the great cause they believe in; and they are concerned for future generations, handing on their values and beliefs to their descendants. (59-60)

This is precisely what I have been exploring in these chapters, particularly as an analysis of both ethics and religion/spirituality. Elsewhere, she states that nature “has inherent worth.
Recognizing the truth of this may be one manifestation of the belief that nature is sacred. Seeing nature as sacred protects it” (66). As mentioned in the first chapter, the fieldwork participants without exception agreed that nature has inherent value, and, while acknowledging a difference between this and nature being ‘sacred,’ nonetheless largely still agreed strongly with the latter sentiment, regardless of their own religious commitments (or lack thereof).

We may have a response here to Grant’s question of how to resolve the competing forces of the modern history-making spirit with a notion of Natural Law; secular, yet spiritual, understandings of limit and transcendence. Somerville acknowledges the connection of her argument to Natural Law theory, but notes an “important difference”: like Natural Law adherents, she believes that “there are some innate fundamental principles that guide us, and we must find them. But unlike them, I believe that we can find and agree on some of those principles whether or not we have a belief in the supernatural or religious” (3).

While I do not agree with some conclusions Somerville draws for particular ethical problems, I wholeheartedly agree with her emphasis on the need to revive a healthy moral language and intuition, one that draws insight from all aspects of human capacity and experience: reason, imagination, science, virtue, spirituality, and a sense of the transcendent. Rather than speaking of ‘transcendence,’ perhaps, in the end, it is more helpful to stick to more modern-friendly terms, such as Taylor’s ‘hypergood’ or Segundo’s ‘absolute value’; certainly, the former’s analysis of strong evaluation and the latter’s of faith and ideology highlight the

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16 Interestingly, Pope Benedict XVI seems to see in the secular environmental movement a hope of reintroducing a dimension of Natural Law, where the moral message carried by nature itself is deciphered with the faculty of conscience, even by those who are not traditionally religious. See John L. Allen Jr.’s column (July 2007) in the National Catholic Reporter (“For Benedict, environmental movement promises recovery of natural law tradition”).
anthropological reality of operative notions of the good. In any case, my contention has been that environmental ethics more readily embrace these dimensions of human existence and meaningfulness, which are denied in the monistic technological system that destroys any overarching sense of purpose.

To claim that environmental ethics are (or can be, if not all there yet) ‘healthier’ ethics in modernity, as I have on several occasions, is to argue that they include an understanding of the twofold, dualistic dimension of ethics, as per Segundo: meaning-structure and efficacy-structure, ‘faith’ and ‘ideology.’ Ideology without faith is impossible; the veil of value-neutrality renders human activity meaningless. Segundo comments with reference to science: “Even the most abstract science is possible and real only on the basis of some nonscientific wherefore which is imbedded in an anthropological ‘faith.’ There must be belief in something; otherwise the scientific and critical nature of the methodology isn’t worth anything” (1984, 133). But equally importantly, faith without ideology – without action, understanding the “signs of the times” – is dead (a notion Segundo draws from James 2:14-17 in particular). Again, Segundo: “Faith . . . is not a universal, atemporal, pithy body of content summing up divine revelation once the latter has been divested of ideologies. On the contrary, it is maturity by way of ideologies, the possibility of fully and conscientiously carrying out the ideological task on which the real-life liberation of human beings depends” (1976, 122). He is speaking of the task of liberation theology, but the statement can easily be broadened to include care and respect for, and responsibility towards, the natural world.

Further, ‘good’ faith – which Segundo aligns with ‘religious’ faith, but as I noted in Chapter Two, can apply to a cultural tradition or movement such as environmentalism – teaches
people to “learn how to learn,” “how to create ideologies or accept ideologies created by others as they forced values to ‘come to terms with’ historical reality” (1984, 130).

Environmentalism thus represents a good ‘faith tradition,’ in Segundo’s sense, in which empowered individuals can operate and from which they can draw. Further, it is a tradition which openly acknowledges responsibility towards a higher good, however it is specifically articulated, on which green ‘absolute values’ and meaning-structures can be based, as well as an overall sense of telos or purpose.\(^\text{17}\)

All of this is not to say that environmentalism is problem-free by any stretch. There are certainly environmentalists all too willing to deny or suppress any sense of teleology in order to gain a more favourable hearing in liberal discourse. As the current upswing in climate change awareness demonstrates, it usually takes a large dose of scientific quantification before change is considered, and thus environmentalists are all too keen to provide it; yet, as we have seen, quantification is the domain of technique, and too easily does efficiency again become the operative norm. And as many of the participants’ responses in the interviews and surveys indicated, despite ready acknowledgment of the hand of technology in environmental destruction, there still seems to be the sense that technology itself is merely a tool, and can be put to good use. This demonstrates a narrower vision of technique than is necessary to understand the modern situation.

\(^{17}\)This is not to say that environmentalism is the only ethic or spirituality with this capacity. I would argue that something similar holds true for many social justice groups. And of course, the philosophers I’ve examined offer (to varying degrees of helpfulness) their own solutions for ‘healthy’ ethics in modernity, as well as a host of others not examined here. One prominent example is Hans Jonas’ “heuristics of fear,” whereby in decision-making, we adopt the rule that “the prophecy of doom is to be given greater heed than the prophecy of bliss” (Jonas 1980, 215). This, then, leads to the imperative of responsibility: “Under such responsibility caution, otherwise a subsidiary matter of our discretion, becomes the core of moral action” (219). This, of course, resonates with the ecological precautionary principle.
Further, despite all that I have argued, in the end there remains a most problematic possibility: Are environmental ethics, compartmentalized as they are as one of many ‘subfields’ of ethics, simply extensions of the modern, liberal discourse? Worse, is environmentalism ultimately a result of technique – seeking efficiency in the face of humanity’s coming up against natural thresholds (rather than limits)? Can we trust that environmentalism is indeed a good ‘faith tradition,’ if the role of referential witnesses has been usurped by the propaganda of the technical system? This is obviously a crucial challenge to my thesis, and one which I may not be able to fully answer, or to answer in a fully satisfactory manner. Obviously, insofar as the environmental movement involves organization and a concern with efficiency, it is indeed within the technological realm. But beyond this, however – despite what I have maintained thus far – have environmental ethics/spirituality become technicized?

Responses from the participants in the fieldwork would seem to indicate that few in the group have really considered the dangers of the system of technique, aware as they may of the problematic uses to which technology has been put. It is, in fact, too early to judge accurately how environmentalists would (or will) react if (when) significant lifestyle restrictions are imposed due to environmental necessity and/or government regulation. It is easy to espouse an ethic of limit when such limits have not yet translated broadly into serious personal constraints. We must be wary of the kind of environmentalism so clearly represented by Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger’s open desire to maintain his opulent lifestyle, including several large sport-utility vehicles, while still reducing greenhouse gas emissions, using ‘green’ technology. The notion of green technology, like any manifestation of technique, is a two-edged sword; we (perhaps unwittingly) become subsumed into the technical system, including its operative paradigms of
limitlessness and homogenization, when we seek answers to environmental problems in further technology. Complete faith in the generation of further technology ignores the reality and necessity of limit, thus largely rendering invalid the positive analysis of environmentalism I have made.

Despite my optimism and argument for the promise of environmental ethics, then, I must temper this with an acknowledgment of a necessary ambivalence towards the environmental movement as a whole. Though I believe that many environmentalists, including those I interviewed, have a real sense of how different their ethics are from modern, technique-oriented, liberal ones, and that this involves some notion of limit and an acceptance of a higher notion of the good, this hardly guarantees that their decisions and actions will always reflect or manifest that. As Ellul’s analysis of propaganda demonstrates, we are unceasingly subject to manipulation in our participation in the technical system; we sometimes, in fact, invite it for the sake of greater integration and comfort.

Is this, then, an unsolvable dilemma? Despite the potential to be a real alternative to dominant ethical frameworks in modernity, is environmentalism simply a 21st-century permutation of the technical system, brought about by necessity in facing natural thresholds? No doubt Ellul would have some suspicion, particularly, as mentioned, with regards to the readiness with which environmentalists accept technical means to fulfil the ethical or spiritual impulse. However, insofar as we accept its embedded notion of limit, an environmental ethic or spirituality does represent resistance to the technological system, regardless of the exact degree to which it is borne out in the lives of individual environmentalists. Environmentalism was never conceived or advocated as a means to ethical or spiritual fulfilment; it was, and is, the natural expression of an
ethical and spiritual impulse. As I have shown, this impulse is at least in part (and a significant part) precisely in opposition to liberal, technique-driven society.

Perhaps the most important aspect to maintain is detachment from the system; constantly questioning what higher purpose and good is served by any given action is necessary for such detachment. Openly espousing a teleological – even spiritual – ethic in the midst of a system that flatly refuses any possibility of such ensures that environmentalism remains ‘transgressive,’ in Ellul’s use of the term. And we must realize that technique is not a strictly neutral tool of efficacy. Though technology can be used to realize environmental values, technique itself represents a (quasi-)meaning-structure that is inherently stultifying and monistic, emphasizing means only, and inimical to environmental (and religious) values. Constant suspicion of technique, of ceaseless pursuit of monistic efficiency, is thus also key to detachment.

All of these things must characterize environmentalism as a viable alternative to the predominant system and ethos, which at minimum must serve as its foil. As Ellul says: “Seeing the Hydra head of trickery and the Gorgon face of high-tech, the only thing we can do is set them at a critical distance, for it is by being able to criticize that we show our freedom” (1990, 411).
References


Appendix 1
Survey and In-Person Interview Analysis

The ethnography I will present and analyze in this appendix is comparatively (to more explicitly sociological or anthropological projects) small-scale, but nonetheless significant. In the early part of 2004, with the permission of the Senior Operations Director of the SCC, I sent out an invitation to all members of the Ontario Chapter (approximately one thousand) to participate in an online survey on religion/spirituality and environmental ethics.\(^1\) Ninety-three people completed the survey.\(^2\) As part of the survey, respondents were asked if they wished to be contacted for a potential follow-up interview (or interviews), and given the option of providing contact information for this purpose. Over sixty of the initial respondents expressed interest in and consent to being contacted for the follow-up.\(^3\) I had originally planned to select a cross-section of people from this group to interview, based on diversity of age, gender, education (and in fact indicated this to the group over e-mail in my initial correspondence with them). However, I ended up changing tactics, and instead gave the group two options, should they still consent to being interviewed: either to have the questions e-mailed to them in a structured form, which they could then peruse and respond to at their convenience (with no restrictions on length of response), or to meet with me in person for a recorded interview. I used the same set of questions in the in-person interviews, but the discussion was less structured and more open-

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\(^1\)See Appendix 2 for a sample survey.

\(^2\)Surveys were returned securely and anonymously via e-mail to a specific e-mail account I set up for that purpose, to which only I had access; this account has since been terminated. All facets of the ethnographic research were evaluated and approved by the University of Toronto’s Ethics Review Office.

\(^3\)This is in and of itself an interesting fact. I found that environmentalists, by and large, are more than willing to discuss their beliefs/ethics, even when it involves a potentially sensitive subject like religion/spirituality.
ended.

Of the over sixty that I initially contacted, approximately half (thirty) responded and indicated their preference for the more detailed interview.\(^4\) Of these thirty, eighteen expressed interest in answering the questions over e-mail; eleven of the eighteen actually sent their responses back to me.\(^5\) The remaining twelve of the thirty expressed interest in an in-person interview; of these, eight actually took place.\(^6\) These interviews, from forty to fifty-five minutes in length, were recorded and transcribed.

The surveys and interviews (both in-person and over e-mail) constitute the two primary sources of ethnographic data for my purposes here. Also included, however, are my own notes and experiences from my personal involvement with the Ontario Chapter. From the Fall of 2001 until the Summer of 2005, I was the Volunteer Coordinator with the Chapter, and in 2004 and 2005 I was a member of the Chapter’s Executive Committee. In the former role I communicated with and kept track of new and potential volunteers; this involved a great deal of e-mail and some in-person correspondence with people (mostly in the Greater Toronto Area) keen on getting actively involved in environmental work. I wrote several “Spotlights” on volunteers for the Chapter’s quarterly newsletter *Sanctuary*, and kept in constant communication with campaign

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\(^4\)I can offer no specific explanation as to why only half of those who had originally expressed interest in further participating actually responded to my invitation to do so. A variety of reasons suggest themselves: having less time than originally thought, losing the e-mail correspondence, changing one’s mind about the desire to be interviewed, etc.

\(^5\)All participants to whom questions had been e-mailed were twice gently reminded and encouraged to send back their responses; only eleven of the initial eighteen did so.

\(^6\)Again, there were a variety of reasons for this. In some cases the participants did not respond to further contact in a timely manner; in others, scheduling proved too difficult (as with, for instance, Elizabeth May, then Executive Director of the SCC, who had expressed interest in being interviewed but due to a hectic work schedule simply had no available time over the period during which I was conducting the interviews).
committees concerning their activities and volunteer needs. I also organized the SCC’s presence at numerous events and fairs. As a member of the Executive, I participated in regular planning meetings during which the overall operations of the Chapter were discussed and decided upon, including campaign directions and the Chapter’s quarterly and yearly budgets.

In both of these roles, I experienced the day-to-day realities of an environmental organization, including how the ethos of the group was articulated and represented in practice. I had the opportunity to meet many volunteers and potential volunteers, and discuss with them their motivations for getting involved. I interacted with all of the key Chapter leaders over the course of my time with the SCC, both officially and unofficially. I consider my own personal experience with the members and volunteers of the Chapter to be a secondary, though also significant, source of ethnographic data, used primarily to supplement the information gleaned from the surveys and interviews.

The purpose of my fieldwork was to discern the role of religion/spirituality in the ethics of individual environmentalists, to get a sense of how they self-identify (religious, spiritual and/or ethical), and how these notions interconnect in explicit or implicit ways in their lived philosophies. I wanted to explore why they were/are environmentally active, and what it is they particularly value and emphasize in their own environmental commitment. Though the scale of the fieldwork is too modest to extrapolate general societal trends, my goal was to have material from actual people, in their own words (at least in the case of the follow-up interviews), to work with and to draw from alongside of the textual resources I consulted in my larger project to examine the nature of environmental ethics and the connection and position of religion/spirituality therein.

In what follows, I will first present what I consider to be the most relevant facts of the
surveys. I will also more specifically draw out trends, tendencies and conclusions limited to my sample set, from the survey-related statistics.

Following this, I will present a synopsis and analysis of the in-person interviews. I will provide segments of the transcripts, again highlighting what I consider to be key parts of the participants’ responses. The interviews were in many ways expansions on the survey responses; thus I will also underline some links between the quantitative data from the surveys with the qualitative data from the interviews.

Survey statistics

The survey was relatively short; two pages, consisting of twenty-six questions. Nearly all were single-choice questions, inviting the participant to either circle the most appropriate answer, or the most important numerical rank representing a scale of agreement about given questions (from 1, “Not at all,” to 8, “Very much so”). The questions sought to draw out participants’ self-identification as spiritual, religious and/or ethical, perceived differences between these terms, and how each term relates to participants’ own environmental sensibilities and commitment.

As mentioned, a total of ninety-three surveys were completed and returned. 38% of respondents were male, 62% female. There was a broad range of ages, as well as a wide range of levels of highest education (Figures 1 and 2). The survey sample is thus, in addition to being primarily female and within the age group of 25-40, as a whole far more educated than average.

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7 Totals for each survey question can be found in Appendix 2; cross-tabulations of survey statistics can be found in Appendix 3.

8 All figures rounded to the nearest percentage point.
As mentioned, the scale was from 1 to 8, “Not at all” to “Very much so,” for the respondent’s agreement with the given statement.

That approximately one third of the survey respondents hold graduate degrees is of note; over 88% have completed post-secondary education. My own experience with SCC members (particularly volunteers) indeed confirms that on average they are well-educated, and predominantly female.

Most of the respondents do not volunteer with the club; only 27% stated that they volunteer regularly. Of those, most (68%) volunteer one to three hours per week (this was the minimum number of hours they could choose from on the survey; my experience is that in fact in most cases it is closer to two to four hours per month). Interestingly, however, 59% of respondents still scaled themselves highly (6, 7 or 8 out of 8) in considering themselves “active environmentalists” (the average response was 5.8 out of 8).

Respondents were balanced in their regular attendance to places of “religious practice/observance” (Figure 3). For the purposes of analysis, I have grouped together the first

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9As mentioned, the scale was from 1 to 8, “Not at all” to “Very much so,” for the respondent’s agreement with the given statement.
three of these categories as those who attend places of religious practice/observance ‘regularly,’ distinct from the latter two groups who rarely or never attend. With this in mind, then, 33% of respondents are regular attenders, while 67% are not.

The picture changes slightly, however, with regard to those who “engage in religious or spiritual activity outside of formal institutions” (Figure 4). Fully 70% of the respondents stated that they engage in some kind of spiritual or religious activity outside the more organized, traditional frameworks; this compared to 33% being regular attenders of more formally religious activities.

This foreshadows a clear trend among respondents in largely distancing themselves from more organized, formal religion, while still being open to (and engaged with) forms of more personal spirituality. Though there was some spread in the responses to the question “Do you consider yourself a religious person?”, the majority were on the low end of the scale (particularly the lowest, 1 out of 8 – Figure 5). The average response was 3.2 out of 8. Clearly, based on
responses to this question, participants by and large do not consider themselves “religious” people.

The contrast is stark, however, with responses to the next question, “Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?” Here, only 16% disagreed by circling 1, 2 or 3, compared to 67% circling 6, 7 or 8 (fully 25% choosing 8 out of 8 – Figure 6). The average response on this question was 5.8 out of 8. Respondents, then, by and large consider themselves to be “spiritual” people.

**Figure 5 - Religious person?**

**Figure 6 - Spiritual person?**

Not surprisingly, with these facts in mind, the respondents also for the most part believe there is a difference between being a religious person and being a spiritual person. Fully half of the responses, 51%, choose 8 out of 8 in affirmative to the question “Do you see a difference between the previous two definitions?”. When adding those who circled 6 or 7, the percentage jumps to 74%. The average response was 6.5 out of 8.
Respondents were very like-minded in their answers to the question “Do you consider yourself an ethical person?”. It is safe to say that every single respondent believes he or she is ethical. No one circled anything lower than 5 out of 8, and only one person circled 5. The rest chose 6, 7 or 8, with the highest percentage on any individual number, 42%, being 7. The average was 7.2 out of 8.

The majority of people, 56%, circled 8 out of 8 in agreement with the question “Do you consider environmental issues to be ethical ones?”; 88% circled either 6, 7 or 8 (Figure 7). The average on this question was 7.1 out of 8. Clearly, then, by and large the participants do indeed consider environmental issues to be “ethical.” The story is slightly different with the next question, “Do you consider environmental issues to be religious/spiritual ones?”. Here, responses ranged significantly, with the highest percentage on any individual number, 23%, being 6 out of 8. Interestingly, the second-highest, 19%, was 8 out of 8. The majority of respondents, 51%, answered 6, 7 or 8 (Figure 8); this suggests that for the most part, they believe environmental issues to be “religious/spiritual,” but there is not the clear majority of the previous question. The
average on this question was 5.1 out of 8.

On the only two questions specifically relating to technology on the survey, participants were more or less in agreement in their responses. Most people, 77%, circled 6, 7 or 8 in response to the question “Do you think that modern technology contributes to environmental problems?”, with the highest individual percentage (33%) being for 8 out of 8 (Figure 9). The numbers were nearly identical for the responses to the next question, “Do you think modern technology can be used to solve environmental problems?": 74% circled 6, 7 or 8, with the highest individual percentage (31%) again being for 8 out of 8 (Figure 10). The average for these two questions was 6.5 and 6.4, respectively, out of 8.

Thus, while we can conclude that most people recognize that modern technology has been a problem for the environment, most people also believe that it can be used to solve

\[\text{Figure 9 - Technology contributes}\]
\[\text{Figure 10 - Technology solves}\]

\[\text{10It should be noted that this question was left blank on two of the surveys, so the percentages are out of a total of 91.}\]
environmental problems as well. I examine the idea of technological society in more detail in Chapter Four.

The most overwhelmingly affirmative response to any question on the survey came for the question “Do you think nature has value in and of itself?”. Fully 87% of respondents circled 8 out of 8, with only 3 people in total circling anything lower than 7 (Figure 11). The average on this question was 7.8 out of 8. Obviously, all participants affirm the value of the environment beyond its utility to human beings. The numbers dip slightly for the next question, “Do you believe nature is in some way sacred?”, though the majority still agreed: exactly 50% circled 8 out of 8, and 77%

![Figure 11 - Nature has value in and of itself?](image1)

![Figure 12 - Nature sacred?](image2)

circled 6, 7 or 8 (Figure 12). The average was still high, 6.6 out of 8. Thus, while some demurred with the more explicitly religious term “sacred,” most still characterize nature this way.

Interestingly, again the majority of respondents recognized a difference between these two questions (i.e., between nature having “value in and of itself” and “being in some way sacred”);

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11 This question was left blank on one survey; the percentages are out of a total of 92.
61% circled 6, 7 or 8, compared to 24% circling 1, 2 or 3.\textsuperscript{12} The average was 5.5 out of 8. Thus, though most people see a difference in these characterizations, they agree for the most part with both of them.

Most respondents agreed that “being a part of an environmental community” is important in the expression of their environmentalism: 60% circled 6, 7 or 8, and the average was 5.7 out of 8.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, though clearly people feel individually motivated to environmental activism, it matters that there are others with whom they can join up.

For the causes of environmental problems, most respondents circled several of the choices (they were asked to circle as many as they thought applied). The most common was “corporate/industry interests,” selected by 94% (Figure 13). Interestingly, while 65% selected “people’s lack of values” as a cause, only 33% selected “people’s lack of morals.” If nothing else, this demonstrates a clear distinction between the idea of “values” and that of “morals.” Only 22% selected “people’s lack of religion/spirituality” as a cause, demonstrating that while the majority of respondents consider themselves religious and/or spiritual (mostly the latter), and as seen earlier just over half consider environmental issues to be religious/spiritual, they do not for the most part seem to think the lack of religion/spirituality is an important cause of environmental problems.

The numbers split interestingly for the question on how big a role people believe religious or spiritual values play in their environmentalism (Figure 14). The numbers are split fairly evenly, although they do reveal that for a fairly high percentage of the participants, 79%\textsuperscript{14}, religious or

\textsuperscript{12}This question was left blank on one survey; the percentages are out of a total of 92.

\textsuperscript{13}This question was left blank on one survey; the percentages are out of a total of 92.

\textsuperscript{14}This question was left blank on one survey; the percentages are out of a total of 92.
As to what activists should appeal to in promoting environmental causes, the highest percentage (90%) selected “ethics/morality” (Figure 15 – again, they were invited to circle as many as they thought applied). This is particularly interesting considering only 33% of respondents think that “people’s lack of morals” is a cause of environmental problems. Also interesting is that the percentage is a bit higher than those selecting “science” (86%).

Respondents were split down the middle in whether they believe activists should appeal to religion/spirituality: exactly half selected this. Again, this is interesting in light of the fact that 79% of respondents admitted that religious or spiritual values played some kind of role in their own environmentalism. I would speculate that this is because most people still think of religion or spirituality as a private affair, a matter of personal choice, thus making it a more difficult thing to appeal to for environmental causes. Here we have a hint at why people might differentiate ethics/morality from religion/spirituality; the former may be associated with something more
public or universal, while the latter is private and personal. Thus it makes sense to appeal to people’s general sense of right and wrong, good and bad, in drumming up support for environmental activism, for this can appeal across religious and/or cultural boundaries. Religion and spirituality, on the other hand, presumably, is too individualistic or culture-specific. This is, of course, only my own speculation from fairly limited data; however, as we shall see, this is supported by what some of the interviewees had to say.

The final question on the survey gauged the level of environmental philosophy or literature respondents were familiar with; while the majority of people circled “some,” a significant percentage circled “none,” while only a small proportion circled “quite a bit” (Figure 16). It is perhaps not surprising, given the high level education, on average, of the respondents, that most should have at least some familiarity with eco-philosophy; it is worth noting, however, that even amongst a more educated sample group, few people would be considered well-read in this field of

\[\text{Figure 15 - What should activists appeal to?} \]

\[\text{Figure 16 - Eco-philosophy read} \]

1\textsuperscript{5} This question was left blank on one survey; the percentages are out of a total of 92.
I should note, however, that the Ontario Chapter for some time had a small group of people (5 or 6) who met regularly throughout the year as an environmental ‘book club.’ Their selections included what might be considered works of environmental studies (with embedded environmental philosophy), such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins’ *Natural Capitalism*.

Analysis of in-person interviews

Of those who expressed interest in participating further than the initial survey, as mentioned, some indicated a preference for an in-person interview. This provided a good opportunity to balance the responses; some answering set questions, taking however much time they needed, and others being given more free reign in the less structured, more personal interaction of a face-to-face discussion. I used the same set of questions that were sent to participants who responded in written form as a framework, or set of guidelines, for conducting the in-person interviews/discussions, and thus the responses are roughly comparable. Participants were free to direct their answers to my questions, though, in whatever way they saw fit; conversations followed their natural flow.

Because of the relatively small number of in-person interviews (eight), and the relatively brief length (forty-five minutes to an hour), I will present a brief summary of each interview along with some analysis. Again, it should be noted that these participants were not specially selected; they were simply those that chose this medium of further participation. As it turned out, they hold a variety of positions, and draw from a variety of backgrounds; this is a further reason for

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16I should note, however, that the Ontario Chapter for some time had a small group of people (5 or 6) who met regularly throughout the year as an environmental ‘book club.’ Their selections included what might be considered works of environmental studies (with embedded environmental philosophy), such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins’ *Natural Capitalism*.

17In these and the excerpts I include in the section that follows, I have edited as little as possible, trying to reproduce in transcriptions as closely as possible what was said on the recordings. As such, they have a much less ‘polished’ feel than the written responses, which participants self-edited. This is the nature of all conversation, and should not in the least imply that the participants in the in-person interviews are in any way less articulate.
presenting a summary of each person individually rather than presenting findings as a whole organized thematically. I feel that the latter style of organization would draw away from understanding the overall positioning of each participant on the question of the relationship of spirituality, religion and ethics in their environmental activism; presenting each in turn better maintains the integrity of their responses to the topic as a whole.

Allison

Allison is in her mid-twenties, working for a nonprofit organization in Toronto. She is not particularly religious herself, but has a definite sense of spirituality, and was not surprised that there would be a connection to explore between spirituality and environmental ethics. She linked her sense of spirituality with her social work, though had a hard time articulating it:

André: It’s hard to have a definite answer, but it’s interesting that you’ve thought about the two possibilities, even if you’re just now sort of articulating...

Allison: Yeah, no... Just trying to - yeah. I don’t know how, I’m even thinking about how I came to become involved, because I . . . I obviously made certain decisions in my life that led me down this path, it’s not like it just sort of happened . . . And I think it definitely was trying to... It was a spiritual kind of thing for me, definitely, not just... Because, it wasn’t just, you know, “oh I want to protect the earth,” it’s more like “I want to protect the earth because” . . . I think it’s worthwhile because I think that . . . [it] gives me something that isn’t necessarily tangible, which is... (long pause).

This excerpt is just a sample of the kind of dialogue that reveals a sense of connection to some ‘higher’ purpose, one that is not easily explained. Though clearly feeling strongly about it, Allison

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18 Participants’ names have been changed from the original.

19 All references to participants’ age, occupation, etc. are at the time of the interview (Spring to Fall of 2003).
had difficulty finding the words to express her sense of spirituality and its connection to her social work, culminating in her trailing off without any explicit definition. This was not unusual for participants generally.

Like participants in the survey and in the written-response interviews, Allison made a clear distinction between religion and spirituality:

**Allison:** So, I look at religion as kind of something . . . I think of it more as, sort of, church, and organized, and . . . a lot of guidelines, that’s more religious . . . I think it’s more structured.

**André:** More structured, yeah.

**Allison:** And spirituality I think is more free . . . and sort of a personal path.

Interestingly, she also linked spirituality with a sense of *responsibility*:

**Allison:** Maybe it’s more like a responsibility.

**André:** Oh, interesting - okay.

**Allison:** In life, you - my choices that I make in life are more because of what I feel . . . the spirituality that I feel . . . People that I choose... (pause) I mean, to be friends with, and . . . And have, you know, sort of that connection, and... Just - my everyday choices about... Being vegetarian . . . I think that that has a lot to do with that too. Just, even riding my bike to work, you know, doing gardening... (laughs)

**André:** Yeah.

**Allison:** Just, you know, things . . . that are some that, kind of stem from this wanting to - find spirituality in myself, maybe?

**André:** Mmm-hmm. Wanting to *find* spirituality...?

**Allison:** Well, to - bring it out.

Like one of the participants in the written-response interviews, she touched on the idea that spirituality is connected to ethics; in fact, she had difficulty distinguishing ethics from spirituality.
To her, they are inextricably linked. Her volunteering, for example, is definitely spiritual:

Allison: . . . I think because you do work for or volunteer with a nonprofit organization, you get something back from that, that can be - that is a spiritual thing...

André: Okay...

Allison: It has a spiritual impact on you, because it gives you a sense of doing something for the world.

Like all survey participants, Allison believes in the inherent value of nature; again, however, she had some trouble identifying exactly why she believes this. She eventually settled on the ‘longstandingness’ of nature as the primary reason for its inherent value; this remains a fairly vague explanation.

When asked about the best strategy for the environmental movement, Allison responded that it would be better to appeal to people’s sense of health and survival; this will have more impact than appeal to their sense of ethics or spirituality. The latter, however, should remain the ultimate goal (once people are more receptive to this kind of change).

She does not believe that technology will ultimately solve environmental problems. There is no “quick fix”:

Allison: I don’t think technology will solve environmental problems. I think a lot of people think it will...

André: Okay.

Allison: And I don’t think it will, I don’t think there is a quick fix.

Technology definitely impacts our worldview in a negative way; yet, she admits, there is good technology, such as solar power.
**Amanda**

Amanda is a middle-aged woman who is an active volunteer with the SCC, both at the Chapter and National levels. Like Allison, she too does not consider herself religious. She has a more explicitly scientific background. Her definition of ‘religion’ mirrors the standard one most participants adhere to:

**Amanda:** I guess when I think of religion, it’s more like an organized kind of system of belief, and what people associated with... customs and rituals, and a particular organization, versus just, you know, your own beliefs, as much... More - a sort of more organized system.

**André:** More structural...

**Amanda:** Yes, more structured, and institutional.

Likewise, her definition of ‘spirituality’ is fairly common:

**Amanda:** That I would see as more opposite of religion, in the sense of... Or even not necessarily opposite, but something that’s more personal. It’s what a person believes and nurtures, their spirit, and their, you know, feelings... And sort of feed them and elevate them to a higher plane, or something like that... Something much more personal.

**André:** Much more personal, yeah.

**Amanda:** Yeah, and not necessarily stuck to some particular organization or associated with anything in particular.

She does not consider herself particularly spiritual either, though she acknowledged having “some aspects” of spirituality.

Amanda definitely considers herself ethical, however, and (not surprisingly) sees a difference between ethics and spirituality (and religion). She conceded a possible connection between ethics and spirituality insofar as there is an urge to protect/preserve that which evokes a kind of spiritual feeling (in this case, nature). Like Allison, she had difficulty articulating the
origins of her sense of ethics, other than pointing to socialization. Her parents were a strong influence on the development of her environmental values (though she did not imply that her upbringing was the *sole* explanation for her sense of ethics).

Though she shied away from religion/spirituality as part of her environmentalism, she did speak of the importance of *wonder* in an environmental ethic:

*Amanda:* That’s the first thing you would do in a society that you want to be more or less sustainable. You want to take children and show them things that make them love nature, and wonder at it, and then when they have that, then, you know, automatically the things that come afterwards come that much easier.

The emotional response to nature implied here seems to correspond with what others might describe as spirituality, something inexplicable and ineffable, though Amanda distanced herself somewhat from this term.

As Allison feels her volunteering to be an expression of her spirituality, Amanda feels hers to be a necessary expression of her ethics:

*Amanda:* I guess it gives me more satisfaction to try and make a bigger difference than besides my private life, so... You know, I do that at home too, but then to try and, when I can, when I have time, in my work, or as a volunteer, to try and do some more, I would like to do that... And I feel the need to do that.

Again, like Allison, Amanda believes that technology, and the technological system, has been a cause of environmental problems, and that it can hinder one’s ability to be ethical; but again, technology can also be good (i.e., ‘green’ technology, promoting environmental sustainability). The understanding of technology is still as a neutral tool, for which we decide the ultimate use.
Dave

Dave, in his sixties, has been in a leadership position within the Club for several years. He is a self-described “militant agnostic,” defining himself neither as religious nor spiritual. His definition and distinction of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality,’ though, were again standard, and he acknowledged that being ‘spiritual’ is now more common than being ‘religious’:

**Dave:** . . . ‘Religious,’ I tend to consider to mean adherence to some formal creed, whereas spirituality can be far more general and less defined than that.

**André:** Mm-hmm... Do you see it likely that people tend to consider themselves more spiritual than religious these days because of that fact?

**Dave:** Well, I would... Let me talk about the people that are my colleagues and friends. And I would say that by and large there are more who would consider themselves spiritual than would consider themselves religious.

He describes himself as being a “secular humanist,” rather than being spiritual:

**André:** . . . What about, in terms of your sense of value towards the environment, that... You wouldn’t define that in any way spiritual?

**Dave:** I would tend to see that as running parallel with my identification as being a secular humanist . . . That I do see that there... You know, that human beings interrelating with each other on this earth have evolved into rules, understandings, conventions of how we deal with each other, and deal with our common living space. And my sense of environmentalism, I think, falls out of that, more than any sense of spirituality.

This, again, leaves unanswered the question of why *environmental* values are any more important than other values that might correspond with the social interrelation of human beings (money, for example). In other meetings, I noticed Dave referring to ‘Mother Earth’; this again implies a particular attitude toward the earth that does not seem to be easily explained. This attitude, however, is obviously not one he considers ‘spiritual.’

Dave, like Amanda, separates being spiritual or religious from being ethical; and he
considers himself ethical. He does, however, recognize that there can be and often is a connection between the two; he admitted to not being able to dismiss the role of his own Catholic upbringing. He suggested that a possible reason for the lack of overtness among activists concerning religion/spirituality might be the specifically Canadian tendency to keep these things private:

André: . . . would you say that by and large—well, it’s difficult to say this, but—getting back to your earlier distinction of religion and spirituality, that there might be, despite your own beliefs on that, there might be the presence this at least sense of spirituality amongst members [of the SCC], in some form or other?

Dave: Sure, sure... And indeed I do see this more... Maybe it has as much to do with the difference between Canada and the United States, where religion in Canada tends to be viewed as very much a private matter, and, you know for example... It was in November of last year, at a Sierra Club [of Canada] meeting when we were just discussing prejudice, oppression, and things of that nature, where someone I’d known as a Club activist for a number of years confessed to being a Roman Catholic, which I would have never guessed, but... In Canada, we tend to keep these things more private, whereas the Americans tend to where them on their sleeves, so thus you end up in the United States with “what kind of a car would Jesus drive”...

This may indeed account for the general absence of mention of religion or spirituality in the meetings and informal conversations I had with SCC volunteers and members. This does not, however, imply the lack of an overall sense of purpose, and of right/wrong or good/bad. Unquestionably, though, people’s relationships to the ‘higher cause’ tend to be personal and kept mostly private.

Dave noted the sense of cohesiveness in the environmental movement, despite differences of opinion; there exists the ‘common denominator’ of working towards the betterment of the planet. Though he is generally pessimistic about the future of the environment, he is inspired by the youth involvement in the environmental movement. Echoing what other participants said, Dave is open to whatever works in healing the planet; irrespective of his own lack of
religion/spirituality, if it inspires people to action, fostering it in others is a positive thing. His observation of the involvement of formal religious institutions in the environmental movement, however, is somewhat guarded:

_Dave:_ Yeah, I mean like, look at the Sierra Club as an example of an organization that’s pretty easy to get involved with, and ask the question for the moment as to where are the religious leaders in terms of their making the step over to be involved in what we’re doing... I would suggest that’s a significant societal gap, if you take a look at the number of professions that, you know, are represented within the Sierra Club ranks, and there aren’t a whole lot of people that seem to be involved in the framework of established religion in there.

Dave’s attitude towards technology is similar to the others’. Though it has imposed on us and our relationship to the environment in a negative way, technology is inevitable; and it can in fact be used to advance environmentalist goals.

**Donna**

Donna is a middle-aged mother in Toronto thinking about graduate school in Environmental Studies. She stated that she has always felt a connection between spirituality and environmentalism. She shares the same definition of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ as the others; religion is rigid and formal, structured, organized, more based on tradition and habit, whereas spirituality is something people “mature into,” more intuitive rather than rule-following. She considers herself spiritual but not religious, and describes it as “a connected feeling,” particularly from being in nature.

Like all the participants, Donna considers herself an ethical person. She sees ethics and spirituality as going hand in hand, though not necessarily ethics and religion:

_Donna:_ Because again, spirituality that evolves in you, and I think - to me - and a
religious person, you were just born into it, and this, this is your lot in life. So, whether you’re a good person or a bad person doesn’t matter, but you are going to be this religious person.

**André:** Mmm-hmm. So - then, this evolved spirituality, does that . . . need an evolved ethics, as well? . . . I’m still trying to figure out this connection between spirituality and one’s sort of spiritual responses, and one’s ethics. Do they go hand in hand, or can you be one without the other...?

**Donna:** I don’t think you probably can be one without the other. I can’t imagine being a - not being an ethical person. You know, not minding whether you stick it to somebody, throwing litter all over the floor, lying to people... I can’t imagine being that kind of person, and actually being a spiritual person. I think they do go hand in hand, very much.

In fact, later in the interview she admitted that it is impossible to think about having an evolved spirituality or an evolved ethics without the other:

**André:** But do you think that someone has a more mature sense of ethics - and, you know, it’s hard to pass judgement, I don’t want to sound like I am . . . but people who, who aren’t necessarily being good because they’re afraid of the consequences, but actually have an evolved sense of what they think is right and wrong - do you think it’s possible for those people to not be spiritual?

**Donna:** No - you know what, no, if you put it that way, I don’t think so, I don’t think so.

**André:** Okay.

**Donna:** No. Because if you’re beyond the, you know, “I shouldn’t do this, because I’m going to be in trouble, or somebody’s going to catch me,” then - but you’re just actually doing it because that’s just the right thing to do, and you feel good when you do it, I think then you’re a spiritual person. I think - yeah, I’d have to say I think the two are really really connected.

As we have seen, this is not the only instance where participants have explicitly linked being ethical with being spiritual; again, it seems to relate to connecting with something larger than or beyond oneself. This is what constitutes an “evolved” (her word, initially) sense of ethics and spirituality.
Donna takes it as a given that nature has inherent value, beyond its use to humans; but this is a feeling that is not easily explained:

**Donna:** But I just, I do, I just feel like they [things in nature] have this inherent value. I don’t know why I feel that, I just always have - I truly do.

**André:** Hmm. So it’s - it’s difficult to explain, it’s just sort of a feeling.

**Donna:** That’s right, it’s a feeling, and again I’ve always had that feeling . . . Like, to see a huge tree being cut down just is enough to make me sick, you know? . . . Because, we don’t have the right to do that, you know?

**André:** Yeah...

**Donna:** So, yeah... So I don’t know . . . That’s a tough one.

Though the origins of this feeling were difficult to articulate, she did acknowledge that how one is raised has a lot to do with one’s attitudes towards nature, and one’s sense of right and wrong generally; ethics get “fine-tuned,” in a similar and related way to the maturation into spirituality. She herself was inspired and influenced by her parents, as well as prominent environmentalists such as David Suzuki. A community of like-minded believers, too, is important for mutual support of shared values.

As for what strategy she thinks is best for effecting positive environmental change, Donna, like others, is open to whatever works, including appeal to ethics, spirituality, and science. She takes the not uncommon perspective that environmentalists should appeal to adults’ minds with dollars and cents, while also focussing on children’s education in order to change attitudes and ethics over the longer term:

**Donna:** I think... Because you’re talking about adults, I think with adults - I don’t think you can step in and change their ethics, at that point . . . They’re like, they’re “too old to change”...
André: (laughs) Yeah.

Donna: You know? I think a lot of people don’t - they don’t want to change, and, you know, who am I to go around changing people’s attitudes... I mean, you know, it’s enough to deal with yourself and your own family... And you know, you do your own kind of work, and save whatever you can, and like we were saying before, but... There’s people out there that don’t want to change, and that’s okay, so - the dollar and cent thing I think will work for them, but maybe their children, that are maybe four or five in school, maybe they can come at it from a different angle, you know?

Again, this seems to acknowledge that most adults are more less set in their values, necessitating more short-term solutions for making people environmentally aware. The more fundamental shift in attitude – whether one calls it ‘ethics,’ ‘spirituality,’ ‘ideology,’ ‘values,’ or something else – must occur, but it must be a part of people’s early socialization. Here once more is the interesting mix of a social/cultural understanding of the development of ethics (and indeed perhaps spirituality) with a clear underlying deference to something beyond us as human beings that makes it worthwhile to begin with to orient our ethics and spirituality towards it, and to shift entire generations in that direction.

Once again, like most other participants, Donna too sees our technological society as problematic, but as an unchangeable fact of life. Though technology has caused damage, it can also be used to help with environmental problems.

Jeremy

Jeremy, a Toronto resident in his mid-twenties, has been employed for several years within the SCC. He admitted to never having spent much time thinking about link between spirituality/religion and environmentalism, other than a fairly vague recognition of the non-
physical: “You know, recognizing that things are more than just a physical presence.” He cited
the common definitions of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality,’ speaking of the “enforced” spirituality in
traditional religion versus something more free and personal. There is a clear difference between
religion and spirituality: “They’re, I think, two separate things that get often too tangled up.” He
himself comes from a Catholic background, but the role of the religion in his life was more
formalistic and ‘official.’

Jeremy does not consider himself a religious person, nor a particularly spiritual one;
though he has had spiritual ‘feelings,’ evoked under certain circumstances. He does, like the
other participants, consider himself an ethical person, with an innate sense of right and wrong. He
describes this as an “ethical compass”:

André: How do we form these ethical compasses?

Jeremy: Well I know there’s lots of answers, but one that I can say on the spot, is
I think a lot of it’s learned from our own personal environment... You know, just a
matter of how you act or people act around you when you’re younger, and the
environment you’re in as you grow as well... I don’t know if I believe in someone
having a sense of right and wrong when they’re born, and just, everyone knows
how to act when they’re born, so I don’t know if there’s a predetermination of
that, but . . . You know, just through observation, the way people act tends to be
based on the way others around them have acted or do act as well.

André: So is it based in some way, or in a large way, on social . . . values?
Communal values, then? If it’s in your environment...

Jeremy: Yeah, I think it’s... Well, I think it’s even - it starts with the smallest unit,
and you know, people in a family can tend to act in similar ways, up to a certain
point . . . And perhaps that’s up to the individual, when, you know, the son or
daughter takes a different path than the parents, and they’re on their own, they’re
setting out different things, or if it’s just a matter of . . . I think it’s just, a lot of
what’s instilled as right and wrong in you when you’re younger is what does stick
with you, and I think as you grow, that’s often challenged, and you make your
decisions on where you’ve - you know, how to act based on what information
you’ve learned in the past, but also what you’ve been exposed to in your regular,
everyday life.

Again, there is an emphasis on social influences in the formation of an ethical framework, but also on finding one’s own “path.”

Jeremy acknowledged the possibility of a connection between ethics and spirituality, though it is not a necessary one, and he had difficulty articulating links between them. In this regard, though, he did have this to say:

**Jeremy:** If I’m having a spiritual experience, then I imagine it’s in a good situation, things are, like... I can’t imagine being - acting against one’s ethics and having a spiritual, like a positive spiritual event...

**André:** Okay, right.

**Jeremy:** So, I think that through acting according to one’s ethics and the right way... is when spirituality, or spiritual happenings, would be more likely to occur than basically from being bad and doing wrong, so there’s sort of... Even though I don’t have a strong religious belief, it’s still ingrained in me about certain ways to act right and wrong, and I think a lot of those do come from religious frameworks or structures, and things like that, so . . . But, yeah, I think that... (pause) I place spirituality as something that’s just... Something that I can’t necessarily explain fully. I think I have a better handle on what I consider religion to be, and what I consider my ethics to be, and spirituality is sort of this nebulous thing that happens occasionally. So I... (pause) And I just said that I don’t think that you can be ethically bad, per se, and have spiritual encounters, or something positive happen...

**André:** Hmm. So, it’s almost as if, in some sense, it’s a reciprocal thing in that ethical behaviour, in some respects, leads to some spiritual events...

**Jeremy:** Well, yeah, I think that’s... Like, I’d say that’s a possibility. But, the way I’ve encountered or thought of spiritual... Things evoking spirituality or spiritual events that could also just be a by chance, happenstance-type thing, you know you happen to be in the right place, you happen to be able to witness something that makes you, that really connects with you... And, when I brought ethics into that I just was more meaning that... (pause) Well, yeah I guess in a roundabout way, I’m saying you have to be ethically good to experience the type of spirituality I’m talking about, and I think if you’re acting in an unethical way, I don’t believe the chances are that you would have a spiritual encounter the way I’m . . . struggling to describe it. It’s possible that there’s an equal or similar type of event that could
happen when, from bad actions, but I don’t really have experience with that, so I don’t know... (laughs)

He then applied this thought to a potential link between ethics and spirituality in his own environmentalism:

Jeremy: Yeah, I guess my sense of environmentalism, or the way I act toward, you know, positively for the environment is driven quite a bit by an ethical understanding of what’s right and wrong, in the large sense. I don’t think it’s right to treat the earth like a pile of resources to be chopped up and sold around the world... So that is an ethical thought, I suppose, or ethically-driven idea, that shapes my environmentalism... And I don’t know if I have a direct connection involving spirituality, but I guess the spirituality aspect could come in as to the “why not?”, why can’t the earth just be treated like a big pile of stuff to be bought and sold. That’s one interpretation, it’s also possible... Another thing is that I recognize that a forest is more than just a bunch of lumber... or that, you know, animals are more than just potential hamburgers, or things like that, so... Perhaps that recognition involves spirituality, per se... I think it - I don’t tend to think of it in that way, but the way I’ve defined spirituality, it sort of fits into that idea.

Like other participants, Jeremy is unsure about the origins of this feeling. A framework of values, however, helps lay the foundation for one’s everyday thinking and action:

Jeremy: You hear of a situation, you assess the facts, and you make your decision based on that. Like, it’s easy to make quick judgements on things, but... And that tends to be driven by, I guess an ethics- or value-based idea, and if you hear of something, you... instantly can decide whether you’re for or against that, or you want a bit more information, but... I think those, I guess, are value-based decisions that you make without really thinking about them in that term.

In discussing strategies for the environmental movement, Jeremy suggested reasons why religion/spirituality are rarely brought into the discussion:

Jeremy:... using spirituality or religion as a call to arms, or call to action for people tends not to be the plan, probably because it’s - religion and spirituality are either seen as very personal or very divisive type of issues... You know, because a lot of different people work together on similar... goals or campaigns or whatnot - bringing religion, or even political views into an argument, or into a discussion can tend to be more divisive things than unifying things. A lot of different people can work together when we’re, have a common goal of saving this
wetland, or stopping this new mall project, or whatever . . . when our common interests is what’s driving us, and variables like what our religious affiliation might be, or which political party we voted for, aren’t necessarily things that are on the table. Even though those things are guiding our actions to a certain extent, they’re not necessarily what’s being, what’s brought us to where we are and what we’re working on.

André: Okay, yeah.

Jeremy: Or if they did, they did in different ways, and if we broke it down, got down to “well, the Torah says this” or “the Bible says this” and people get into divisive issues, then... Plans and projects tend not to even get off the ground. (laughs)

Again, my own experience interacting with members and volunteers in the SCC confirms this. It is an interesting phenomenon of social groups in general that people should be propelled by similar understandings of the good, yet unwilling to speak of it in anything but the most general of ways for fear of causing conflict with others. As Jeremy observes, it is often more divisive than helpful to speak in explicitly religious terms; even language that may not be specific to a tradition, but is nonetheless overtly ‘spiritual,’ (e.g. speaking of ‘connectedness,’ or even ‘love’) is rare in a group setting, presumably because it may cause some to be uncomfortable. Yet there remains the underlying shared, generally unexplainable notion that working towards environmental sustainability is right and good thing to do.

Like the others, Jeremy agrees with critiques of technology, but says that “technology in and of itself is not a problem”; it is instead the uses we are making of existing technology. He does recognize that technology shapes how we see nature. While reiterating that it is wrong to reify technology, Jeremy acknowledged problems associated with unquestioned faith in technology:

Jeremy: You know, it’s a bit of a hard thing to think of, like why would you
believe in technological... Like, if you’re believing in technology as in human ingenuity, and “we together will be able to pull through this, if we put our brains together and build something that’ll solve it,” that’s even a scary thought, per se, because that’s admitting that you can’t do anything yourself, and that someone who understands technology will come along with a better fix, and technology will save the day... So, in that sense, waiting for a product to come out we can buy and fix something, or leaving something to the experts, as opposed to taking action on your own, is one consequence that can come from belief in technology as a solution.

Saleema

Saleema works in the field of Environmental Studies at the University of Toronto. She is a practising Muslim, and has taught in Islamic schools. She sees ‘religion’ as an identifying category: “Some way to put some concrete... definition to something that can sometimes seem abstract.” Spirituality, on the other hand, is what ‘fills out’ religion. For her, this relates specifically to her connection with God:

Saleema: . . . See, as an individual that believes in God, right, like myself, that spirituality has to be expressed from my personal to the outward. And it has to be expressed the way I treat myself, the way I keep my connection with God, like the decisions I make. It also has to reflect onto the individuals because we [Muslims] don’t have this iron theory of each individual - everyone is here and has to do with other people... So, and then that spirituality has to extend to the community, and it goes beyond - again, it has to go into the environment, because all these things are connected. They’re not separate from each other.

For her, empty, formalistic religion is “low”; being spiritual (though perhaps still expressed outwardly in traditionally religious ways), developing a connection with the transcendent, is what gives religion meaning.

Being ethical, says Saleema, can be like being religious in the more formalistic way, particularly since the moral code of the Qur’an is “so darn simple.” Understanding the spirit of
the moral code, however, involves a strong sense of spirituality. In this sense ethics and spirituality tend to correlate; generally, being more ethical means being more spiritual. The latter helps with the former: “. . . it makes you come to better decisions with things that might not be so outlined and clear.”

Like others, Saleema was somewhat vague about the origins of ethics. She acknowledged that they are influenced by culture, but it also relates to how individuals develop for themselves. Having been a teacher at an explicitly religious school, she also spoke of the importance of education in developing both spirituality and ethics.

When asked about technology, Saleema recognized its necessity, and the general drive to invent; she is, however, aware of the problems associated with this:

Saleema: So we do have those [technological] capacities. But then, as humans, who have ethics and spirituality, we have to think how are we going to do these things, how do we... Just - just for the sake of, woah, how brilliant we can be, just keep on doing things . . . That doesn’t make sense.

Technology for the sake of technology alone, thus, is a questionable impulse; we are still responsible morally and spiritually for the ends that technology serves.

Sharon

Sharon is completing her Ph.D. in environmental sciences at the University of Toronto. Like Saleema, she has a scientific as well as religious background. She holds the standard distinction of religion and spirituality; her Jewish upbringing gives her the understanding of ‘religion’ as observing holy days, daily and weekly rituals, and other outward practices. Spirituality, on the other hand, she had not thought of much until more recently, in her own
exploration of her personal understanding of and connection to God. This distinction is similar to Saleema’s.

She does not, at this point, see a connection between ethics and spirituality:

**Sharon:** Yeah, I don’t see as much of a connection between that feeling of spirituality, or trying to struggle to have a concept of God, and ethics... Maybe I’ll develop that, but at this point I don’t really see a connection.

Environmental values exist outside of her; they are something she comes to participate in. She explains:

**Sharon:** Well, I think it’s something I participate in... I think that environmental values are something that are, and out there in some parts of society and should be out there in more parts of society, and that we could all agree on certain environmental values, certain basic environmental values, that I think are, would be universally applicable... And that they don’t just come from mine or people’s individual thought processes, that these are something similar to just, to universal human rights, that we consider there’s some things that human people are entitled to, and we hope that everyone - at least, I hope that everyone would share those concepts of universal human rights, and I consider this along the same lines.

Again, however, there is a vagueness about what exactly these values stem from. The comparison to the idea of universal human rights is apt; like environmentalism, it is a value/belief that is considered ‘transcendent,’ insofar as it originates beyond the whims of human preference and society in general. The suggestion is that though we develop our own system of ethics (influenced at least from the outset by our socialization/upbringing), we come to participate in values the originate and exist outside of us.

Sharon mentioned that although scientific facts can originally contribute to a sense of environmentalism, something beyond science is needed to bolster the values within it:

**Sharon:** (pause) I think science does have a lot of different values within it.... But I don’t think it has the capability to provide us with ethical answers. The science can go in so many different directions, and science is the process of trying to
discover and understand how things work in the natural world and beyond, and that, that can lead people in a number of directions... So I think the value system to guide science needs to come from outside science, it doesn’t have the ability to have kind of a overarching, overriding value system - but people within the scientific community have a number of different values, and that there isn’t any way within science to have one overriding value system.

The commonality between ethics and spirituality, then, in Sharon’s understanding (though she herself did not state it as such), seems to be a relationship with the transcendent; environmentalism is a more communal values-system, but nonetheless something immeasurable and unprovable, whereas spirituality is a more personal quest to understand God.

Sharon agrees with the assessment that we are a technological society, and is disturbed by the fact:

**Sharon:** . . . I think that, because we rely so much on technology and our lives are completely suffused with it every day, that it just removes that... We forget that, that we’re part of a natural system, that we’re part of an ecosystem, that we’re dependent on certain ecosystem processes to live... And I think that it’s a problem, that that’s a reason why a lot of people don’t necessarily share environmental values or don’t even think about the environment, because they don’t, they’re not aware of it, they don’t see it’s important. And I think... I mean more than important, they don’t see that it’s a fundamental necessity to their lives, and I think technology is a reason that that is. And I think that we should, as a society, try and be just more aware of that, and that we should somehow just gain a better appreciation as a society for how things work, like how things grow, how are food grows in the ground, and how we need a lot of things for that to happen - that we need soil, and we need rainfall. I don’t think people appreciate that, and I think it’s because of technology, in part.

By alienating us from the natural world, technology prevents people from coming to environmental values. Helping people (all people, not just environmentalists) come to such values – if necessary, by changing their existing ones – is for Sharon an important way to effect positive environmental change.
Pamela

Pamela, an environmental lawyer in Toronto, does not consider herself religious or spiritual. She does not connect her sense of environmentalism with spirituality, though she is open to others who do so, if it strengthens their environmental values. Like others, she distinguishes religion from spirituality along the lines of ‘organized’ versus ‘personal’:

Pamela: Faith imposes structure on you, you’re supposed to believe this, you’re supposed to do that, this is bad and this is good. It can be very absolutist, depending on the faith . . . And the way it’s taught. So... Whereas spirituality doesn’t place those boundaries on you.

Like the other participants, however, she does consider herself to be an ethical person. She connects this with her notion of justice:

Pamela: My ethics are very grounded in notions of justice, and... I think I’ve always - I don’t know where I developed it, but from a young age I’ve always had significant concern about perceived injustice around me, or actual injustice around me, or... What amounts, I think, to people with power pressing either other life or other people who have less power.

She acknowledged that this in many cases is probably similar to notions held by religious adherents, though for her it is outside of a religious or spiritual framework. Notable again is the inability (and lack of concern) to explain the exact origins of this notion of right/wrong. For Pamela, it is innate:

Pamela: I think it’s part of being human . . . Our emotional makeup. Having empathy and sympathy, and... It certainly troubled me, you know, early on, in high school, like when I really started, and teachers started to raise environmental issues, I would... You know, it would bother me to hear things like there are three hundred unidentified chemicals in Lake Ontario - like there’s just something really wrong with that... (laughs)

André: Yeah...

Pamela: It’s just somebody who’s not... Like there’s no sense of respect, for the
For the lake as a living entity.

This innate sense has always been there for her. When I asked why it was directed towards the environment in particular, she suggested that it might have been because it has no voice, and is thus particularly powerless. In any case, her innate sense of justice informs her environmental values:

**André:** Okay. And how do those values tie into your ethics? Do your values come from, or do they lead to your sense of what is ethically right and wrong?

**Pamela:** I think my values come from what is ethically right and wrong.

**André:** Okay. So, your - what you were talking about earlier, this sort of innate response or reaction you have to injustice... That leads to kind of a set of ‘green’ values, for example.

**Pamela:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

It is worth noting that though I asked if her values come from or lead to her *sense* of right and wrong, she answered that she thinks her values come from what *is* ethically right and wrong. This is a seemingly minor point, but the (perhaps subconscious) assumption is that there *is* some kind of standard of right/wrong, outside of personal preference, opinion, or social background.

Pamela, like all of the other participants, also believes that nature has inherent value, independent of humanity. When asked why, she again was not certain; she theorized that it is tied to the “uniqueness of life on earth”:

**Pamela:** Well, I would guess that, at least for me, that it’s in part tied to the uniqueness of life on earth as it is, because we haven’t found anything else nearby that’s like us... So in that way, it’s an amazing thing. And having come from a biology background, and my specialty when I was in biology was development, developmental biology, so... You know, I learned all about how life develops, not as much in the plants, but more in the animal kingdom - and it’s just an amazing thing. It’s a miracle, it’s an amazing thing, and I use the word ‘miracle’ knowing that it’s based in something I can’t explain, but that’s the reality of it.
André: Okay, yeah.

Pamela: There is no explanation that’s satisfactory to me, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t *an* explanation out there, and I don’t have to grasp everything. I’m willing to accept that it exists, and it is, and it’s valuable for what it is.

Though respecting that Pamela explicitly does not describe herself this way, I would suggest that such an explanation of the inherent value of nature could easily be given by someone else as an expression of his or her spirituality. The wondrous, and ultimately mysterious, quality of nature is in fact the reason others give for their spiritual connection to it.

For Pamela, one’s sense of ethics is personal; it can be influenced and shared by others, but one must be careful not to judge needlessly. She opposes dogmatism in both religion and environmentalism:

Pamela: I’ve changed my - not sure I’ve done it consciously, but I certainly think my approach to dealing with other people in the environmental community, in terms of how I handle any given environmental issue, is very different than a number of other environmentalists because I try not, I really try hard to take judgment out of it... In the sense that, despite the fact that justice is so important to me, and that it’s important you do the right thing rather than the wrong thing, I think it’s important that every individual, and what they do - you have to be really careful about making, you know, having labels of good and bad, in terms of the environmental community, because it alienates people and it doesn’t get you anywhere... So, I try instead not to speak in absolutes, whereas I think a lot of people in the environmental community are terrible at that, they speak in absolutes. Which is one of the things that turns me off of religion, you know...

André: Right.

Pamela: I’m not a person who likes absolutes, I like freedom to think about it, and change my mind if I want to.

This respect for the autonomy of others and their freedom of choice reflects a powerful ethic of modernity (as I explore more fully in the main body of the dissertation), but it does not entail moral relativism. As mentioned, Pamela’s sense of “the right thing” and “the wrong thing” is not
contingent; echoing a fairly common reason for the rejection of formal religion, however, she resists engaging in what might be perceived as moralizing or dogmatizing.

Pamela’s strategy for effecting positive environmental change parallels what several other participants said. People’s fundamental values and ethics need to be changed, but this is a long-term goal, starting with education of the young. In the meantime, “emergency measures,” such as stronger legislation, are needed for adults more set in their ways. Whether this involves appeal to science, ethics, or religion, or all three, is ultimately unimportant, so long as the results are achieved.

As for technology, Pamela views it as a double-edged sword; while recognizing potential goods, she is irritated that the first solution proposed to technological problems is simply more technology. This is a hallmark of technological society. She also has a mistrust of technology in the hands of big business, whose obvious primary concern is profit.
Appendix 2
Survey and Written Interview Samples

Sample survey

Age (circle one): 18-24 25-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 60+

Gender: M / F

Education: high school
(circle highest) some university/college
college diploma
university degree
Masters
Ph.D.

Are you a member of the Sierra Club of Canada? yes / no

Have you donated financially to the SCC (beyond membership dues)? yes / no

Do you volunteer with the SCC? yes / no
If YES, how many hours a week? 1-3 3-5 5-10 10-15 15+

How often do you attend a place of religious practice/observance on average?
more than once a week / once a week / once a month / once or twice a year / never

How often do you engage in religious or spiritual activity outside of formal institutions?
frequently / occasionally / never

Do you think we are in the midst of an environmental crisis? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Do you consider yourself an active environmentalist? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Do you consider yourself a religious person? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Do you see a difference between the previous two definitions? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Do you consider yourself an ethical person? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Not at all Very much so
Do you consider environmental issues to be an ethical ones? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Do you consider environmental issues to be religious/spiritual ones? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Do you think that modern technology contributes to environmental problems? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Do you think modern technology can be used to solve environmental problems? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Do you think nature has value in and of itself? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Do you believe nature is in some way sacred? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Do you see a difference between the previous two definitions? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
How important is being a part of an environmental community in the expression of your environmentalism? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

What do you think, generally, is behind environmental problems? (circle as many as you think apply)
- people’s lack of proper values
- people’s lack of morals
- people’s ignorance
- people’s lack of religion/spirituality
- corporate/industry interests
- several unrelated mistakes
- other

How big a role would you say religious or spiritual values play in your environmentalism? large / medium / small / no role
What do you think activists should appeal to in promoting environmental causes? (circle as many as you think apply)
- science
- religion/spirituality
- ethics/morality

How much ‘eco-philosophy’ have you read? quite a bit / some / none (E.g. Thomas Berry, Rachel Carson, Paul Hawken, etc.)

Do you agree to be contacted by the researcher, André Maintenay, for an interview to further discuss these subjects? The initial interview will be approximately 45 minutes; if you are interested and consent, there may also be a longer, more in-depth follow-up interview. Note that this is not a commitment, but simply an agreement to be contacted. yes / no
if YES, please provide contact info (this information will be held in complete confidence):
Survey totals

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How often engage in religious/spiritual activity outside formal institutions?

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Do you think we are in the midst of an environmental crisis?

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Do you consider yourself an active environmentalist?

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How important is being a part of an environmental community in the expression of your environmentalism?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
1 5 9 9 13 21 16 18 (92/93)

What do you think, generally, is behind environmental problems?

lack of values lack of morals ignorance lack of religion/spirituality
yes 60 no 33 yes 31 no 62 yes 84 no 9 yes 20 no 73

Corporate/industry interests several unrelated mistakes other
yes 87 no 6 yes 25 no 68 yes 30 no 63

How big a role would you say religious or spiritual values play in your environmentalism?

large medium small no role
27 19 27 19 (92/93)

What do you think activists should appeal to in promoting environmental causes?

Science religion/spirituality ethics/morality
yes 80 no 13 yes 46 no 47 yes 84 no 9

How much 'eco-philosophy' have you read?

quite a bit some none
13 53 26 (92/93)

Survey question averages on scaled questions

Environmental Crisis: 7.2
Active Environmentalist: 5.8
Religious Person: 3.2
Spiritual Person: 5.8
Difference 1: 6.5
Ethical Person: 7.2
Enviro. Issues Ethical: 7.1
Enviro. Issues Religious: 5.1
Technology Contributes: 6.5 (91/93)
Technology Solves: 6.4
Nature Value: 7.8
Nature Sacred: 6.6 (92/93)
Difference 2: 5.5 (92/93)
Enviro. Community: 5.7 (92/93)
Written interview questions

1. What do the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ mean to you?

2. Do you think there’s a difference between being ‘religious’ and being ‘spiritual’? If so, what, and why?

3. On the survey, you were asked if you considered yourself a religious person, a spiritual person, both, or neither. Please elaborate, including whatever practice you engage in.

4. Do you consider yourself an ‘ethical’ person? Why, or why not?

5. Do you think there’s a difference between being an ethical person and a religious or spiritual one? What do you think is the relationship between one’s ethics, and one’s religion/spirituality?

6. Does your sense of religion/spirituality affect your attitude towards the environment? If so, how? Does your sense of ethics affect your attitude and action towards the environment? Again – if so, how?

7. Other than religion/spirituality or ethics, what else influences or affects your attitude and action towards the environment?

8. What values shape your environmentalism? How do you think you came to adopt such values?

9. Who, if anyone, inspires your environmentalism? Who, if anyone, inspires you to adopt ‘green’ values’?

10. Some philosophers have argued that systems of technology – not just specific technologies, but the whole social, cultural, and relational system of producing and depending on technology – has produced a mechanical way of understanding ourselves and our environment, and of having any values other than technological ones. What do you think has been, and will be, the role of technology in environmental issues?
11. What do you think is the best way to respond to widespread environmental destruction? Do we need a different ethic? A new religion/spirituality, or renewal of old? What’s the best way to implement change?

12. Please add any other comment/elaboration on your survey responses, or something else that wasn’t addressed that you feel is important.
Appendix 3
Survey Cross-Tabulations

For each of what I considered to be the most important questions, I looked at differences/divisions for age, gender, and education.\(^1\) The first interesting divisions to note were for the questions “How often do you attend a place of religious practice/observance on average?” and “How often do you engage in religious or spiritual activity outside of formal institutions?”. It is perhaps not surprising that the highest percentage of people attending a place of religious practice regularly, which I define as once a month or more\(^2\), was among those aged 51-60: 66.7\%. The second highest percentage, 54.6\%, was among those over 60. Those were the only two groups in which most people are regular attenders. The highest percentage of non-attenders\(^3\) was for those in the 31-40 age group, at 86.4\%, followed closely by those aged 25-30, at 85\%. Interestingly, nearly half of those in the 18-24 group (44.4\%) are regular attenders.\(^4\)

Responses to the next question tell a slightly, though not wholly, different story. Again, the highest percentage of people who “never” engage in religious or spiritual activity outside of formal institutions was among 31-40 year olds. This percentage, however, was still less than half – 45.5\% – meaning that in all age groups, people engaged in at least some religious or spiritual activity outside of institutions (i.e., “frequently” or “occasionally”). In fact, even in the 31-40

\(^1\)It is beyond the scope here to fully examine the implications of demographic divisions in the survey responses; I include and comment briefly on them, however, because I believe they are noteworthy in themselves.

\(^2\)This includes people who selected “more than once a week,” “once a week,” or “once a month.”

\(^3\)This includes people who selected “once or twice a year” – which I deemed only nominal attendance – or “never.”

\(^4\)For this group in particular, the small sample size (nine total) should be kept in mind.
Again, the small sample size (five total) should be kept in mind. Without getting overly bogged down in the statistics, we can conclude that across all age groups, most participants engage in some religious or spiritual activity; and that, perhaps not surprisingly, this occurs more often than regular attendance to formal places of practice. I will return to this theme with later cross-tabulations.

The gender division for attendance was nearly identical, with approximately one third of each group (men and women) being regular attenders. Interestingly, though, the gender division was pronounced with regards to engaging in religious or spiritual activity outside of institutions: 39.7% of women responded “frequently” (higher than both of the other two options), compared to 17.1% of men. Likewise, only 22.4% of women responded “never,” as opposed to 45.7% of men. This difference will come up again in later cross-tabulations, where I will comment more specifically.

Looking at divisions in levels of education, the lowest percentage of regular attenders was amongst Ph.D. graduates, at 22.2%, followed by Master’s graduates at 27.3%. The highest, perhaps surprisingly, was for the high school group: 40%. The numbers remain somewhat constant for those engaging in religious or spiritual activity outside of institutions. Two statistics in particular stand out: the quite low percentage of Ph.D.s who do so “frequently,” 11.1%, and the high percentage of those with a college diploma who do so “frequently,” 50%. Interestingly, the lowest percentage among education groups of those selecting “never” was of Master’s graduates, at 27.3%; this throws some doubt on the idea that religious or spiritual activity generally lowers in proportion to higher levels of education. Even amongst Ph.D.s, over half (55.5%) engage in some religious or spiritual activity.

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5 Again, the small sample size (five total) should be kept in mind.
Also of note is the division between volunteers and non-volunteers. A significantly higher percentage – 36.8% versus 24% – of non-volunteers are regular attenders of places of formal religious practice. This is somewhat mirrored in the fact that 35.3% of non-volunteers engage “frequently” in religious or spiritual activity outside formal settings, compared to only 20% of volunteers. While the difference is not stunning, it does lead me to speculate whether volunteering might not function, in terms of the sense of meaning and fulfilment it provides, as religious or spiritual activity.

Though I did not do many cross-tabulations with those who scaled themselves highly (6, 7 or 8 out of 8) on the question “Do you consider yourself an active environmentalist?”, there was an interesting result when comparing this group to the averages of the surveys as a whole in responses to the questions on considering oneself a “religious” or “spiritual” person (the next two questions on the survey). As noted, 28% of the respondents consider themselves religious, compared to 54.8% being explicitly non-religious. There were slightly higher and lower percentages on these two designations respectively, 32.7% and 50.9%, for the group of “active” environmentalists. Similarly, where the general averages for people considering themselves spiritual and non-spiritual were 66.7% and 11.8% respectively, for “active” environmentalists they were 70.9% and 10.9%. While these differences are not significant enough to draw major conclusions, they at least suggest that on average those who think of themselves as “active” environmentalists tend to be more open about considering themselves either religious or spiritual.

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6Here and after in the section on cross-tabulations, I designate “religious” to mean those who selected 6, 7 or 8 out of 8 for the question “Do you consider yourself a religious person?”; conversely, I designate “non-religious” as those who selected either 1 or 2 out of 8 on the same question. The same determination applies to those I call “spiritual” and “non-spiritual.”
than those who do not rate themselves as particularly active.

Responses and cross-tabulations for the questions “Do you consider yourself a religious person?” and “Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?” are particularly noteworthy because it is only at this point on the survey that the terms ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ are explicitly distinguished. The first cross-tabulations I did with these categories involved looking at the connections between people considering themselves religious, non-religious, spiritual, and non-spiritual, and regular attendance to places of religious practice, as well as engagement in religious or spiritual activity outside formal institutions. Aside from the unsurprising results – for instance, the correlations between respondents not considering themselves religious and also not regularly attending places of religious practice – there are some interesting statistics. While most of those who consider themselves religious are also regular attenders of places of religious practice, a significant percentage of this group, 19.2%, are not. This suggests, at least to some degree, a dissatisfaction with formal institutions/practices even among those who explicitly consider themselves religious. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of people (96.2%) considering themselves religious engage in some religious or spiritual activity outside of institutions; what is more noteworthy is that approximately half (51%) of people considering themselves non-religious do so as well. Again, this points to the distinction people make between being ‘religious’ and engaging in more personal forms of spirituality.

Indeed, most people (though not a strong majority – 61.3%) who consider themselves spiritual are not regular attenders of places of religious practice. Conversely, 85.5% of them do engage in some form of religious or spiritual activity outside of institutions.

I will mention only a few interesting statistics from the demographic divisions for the
questions about being a religious or spiritual person. We have seen that most respondents consider themselves spiritual but not religious; the most dramatic difference was in the 41-50 age group, where only 18.8% consider themselves to be religious, but 81.3% consider themselves to be spiritual (and this age group was the only to have no respondent scale him/herself as non-spiritual). Also interesting is the over 60 group: while 36.4% consider themselves to be religious, 81.8% consider themselves to be spiritual. This suggests that the differentiation between ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ is not necessarily generational; this is confirmed by the fact that 72.7% of those in the over 60 group selected 6, 7 or 8 out of 8 in affirming the question of whether there is a difference between being a “religious person” and a “spiritual person.”

Also noteworthy is the gender division for these questions. A slightly larger percentage of men than women think of themselves as religious (31.4% versus 25.9%), and a slightly lower percentage explicitly non-religious (48.6% versus 58.6%). By contrast, 72.4% of women consider themselves spiritual (and only 8.6% explicitly non-spiritual), compared to 57.1% of men (with 17.1% being explicitly non-spiritual). ‘Spirituality,’ while not the exclusive domain of women participants, certainly seems to be a more comfortable term of self-identification for them.

Moving to the question “Do you consider environmental issues to be religious/spiritual ones?”, it is interesting to note that of those who answered in the affirmative (scaled 6, 7 or 8 out of 8), only 51.1% attend a place of religious practice regularly (though 93.6% engage in some religious or spiritual activity outside of institutions), and only 46.8% consider themselves to be religious (though 91.5% consider themselves to be spiritual). Again, even among those who believe environmental issues to be religious/spiritual, there is a significant lack of participation in formal religious practice, and an unwillingness generally to self-identify as ‘religious.’ Similarly,
of those who consider nature to be “in some way sacred” (scaled 6, 7 or 8 out of 8), only 39.4% attend a place of religious practice regularly, and only 35.2% consider themselves religious. Clearly, many participants are comfortable with the religious term ‘sacred’ being applied to nature, while shying away from links to religion themselves.

Of those who responded in the affirmative (scaled 6, 7 or 8 out of 8) to the question “How important is being a part of an environmental community in the expression of your environmentalism?”, only 34.6% are regular attenders of places of religious practice (nearly identical to the average for all respondents). Strongly valuing being part of a ‘community of believers’ (in this case, the shared beliefs are environmental in orientation) does not seem, by and large, to translate to an increased participation in religious communities.

Cross-tabulations on remaining questions did not reveal any particularly surprising results. The trends that have been identified thus far continued to surface.