

Paul Tillich's Enduring Relevance to Ecophilosophy and Environmental Ethics

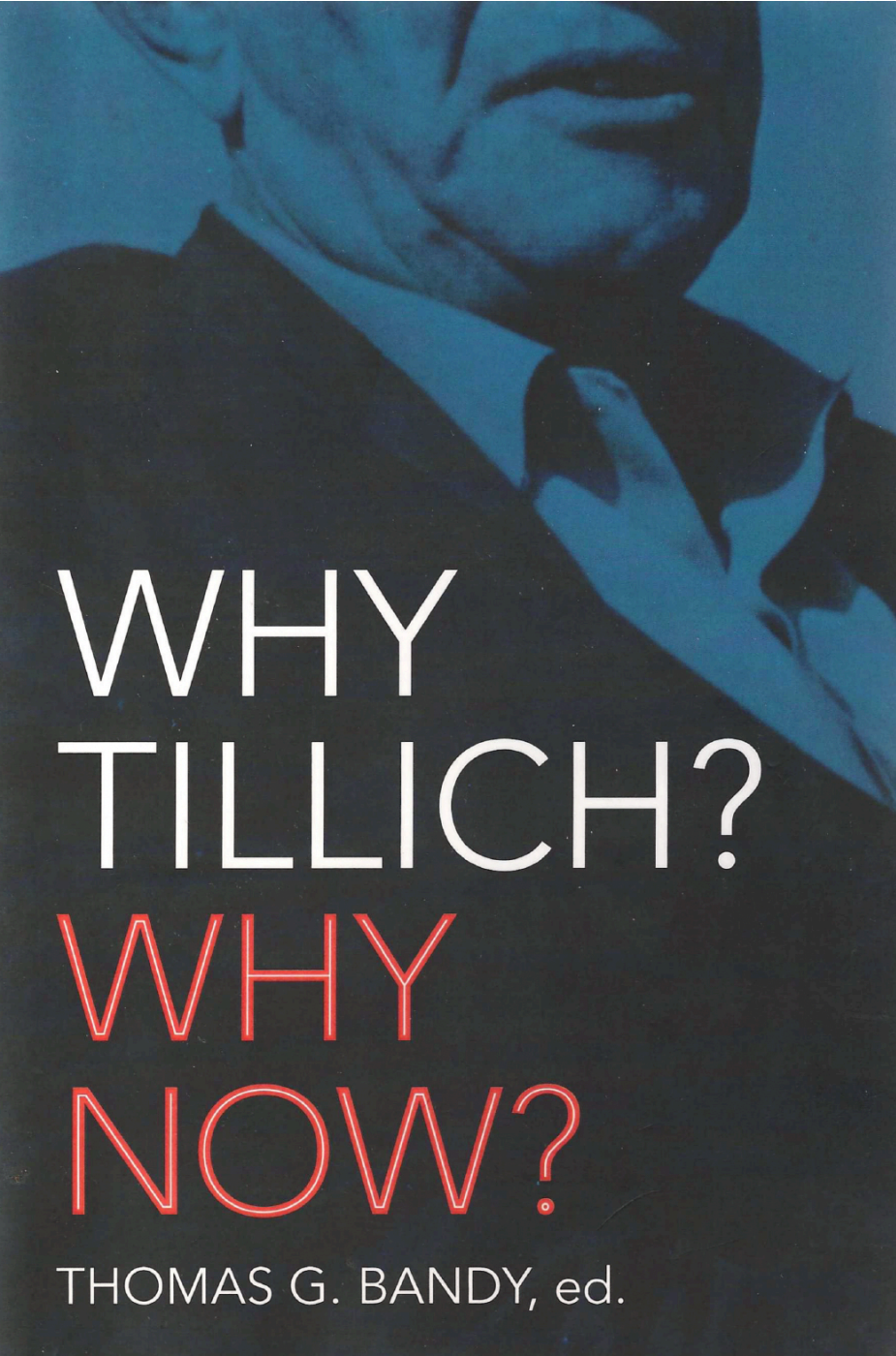
Jeremy D. Yunt

Is nature not completely subject to the will and willfulness of man? This technical civilization, the pride of mankind, has brought about a tremendous devastation of original nature, of the land, of animals, of plants. It has kept genuine nature in small reservations and has occupied everything for domination and ruthless exploitation. And worse: many of us have lost the ability to live with nature. We fill it with the noise of empty talk, instead of listening to its many voices, and, through them, to the voiceless music of the universe. Separated from the soil by a machine, we speed through nature, catching glimpses of it, but never comprehending its greatness or feeling its power. Who is still able to penetrate, meditating and contemplating, the creative ground of nature?"—Paul Tillich, "Nature, Also, Mourns for a Lost Good" (1948)¹

As an undergraduate student in the early 1990s at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC), I had the good fortune of meeting Dr. Paul Lee. Lee was Paul Tillich's last teaching assistant at Harvard, and he came to UCSC to teach philosophy after having taught at Harvard and MIT. He eventually founded the Religious Studies Department at UCSC, and then the Homeless Garden Project—a social and ecological program that fed the Santa Cruz community with organic produce, while also helping homeless people find meaning in their life and get off the streets and into permanent housing. In my time with Lee, he would often repeat what he said was one of Tillich's favorite mantras: "We are living in the late stage of the self-destruction of industrial society, as a world above the given world of nature." These words encapsulated for Tillich the spiritual and ecological urgency that industrialization had foisted upon humanity.

Tillich's life coincided with the rise of industrialization, and he witnessed how the worldwide commodification of the natural world—the packaging of nature into "goods" for consumption—had led to what he called a "second

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 79.



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THOMAS G. BANDY, ed.

nature," or "Frankenstein," above given, organic nature.² While Tillich appreciated the creative spirit at work in industrial inventiveness, he also knew the vast power of this ascendant synthetic world to bend humans to its unnatural, stultifying, and often dehumanizing demands. This destruction of nature at the hands of humans was for Tillich a clear symbol of our existential estrangement—from ourselves, from other humans, from nature and nonhuman animals, and ultimately from the creative Ground of Being itself, i.e., God. Of course, Tillich had his own particular, non-objective understanding of the creative source of nature, and one scholar elucidates it perfectly: "Instead of looking outside nature for a supernatural being called God, Tillich looks through nature to the transcendent depth and ground of nature. God, says Tillich, is not a being, he is ... the power of being which enables all things that are to be."³

Were he alive today, I have no doubt Tillich would be one of the most outspoken Christian thinkers advocating for a more humane and compassionate appreciation of nature and all its nonhuman beings. For Tillich, to be religious was to be deeply concerned about humanity's impact on the natural world, for nature is an expression of Being-Itself. Although he never developed a systematic "theology of nature," he was far ahead of other Western religious thinkers in understanding and expressing the dialectical role the material world plays in the human existential drama, including how the fate of humanity and nature are shared: "Nature is not only glorious; it is also tragic. It is subjected to the laws of finitude and destruction. It is suffering and sighing with us."⁴ For this reason, Tillich never hesitated to use strong religious language to decry the real danger underlying humanity's troubled relationship with nature, as well as the spiritual impoverishment issuing from the industrial process:

I would say the most universal expression of the demonic today is a split between the control of nature by man, and the fate of man to fall under the control of the product of his control. He produces and then falls under the power of what he has produced, the whole system of industrial existence. It has liberated him, it has given him

control over nature and now it puts him into a servitude in which he loses more and more his being, his person.⁵

Tillich stood out amongst the theologians of his day because he took seriously the material world's role in aiding or distorting our spiritual lives. As such, he challenged common anthropocentric viewpoints and placed intrinsic ethical value not only on nonhuman animal and plant life, but even on the inorganic dimension that makes all of organic nature possible in the first place. In his well-known *Saturday Evening Post* article from 1958, "The Lost Dimension in Religion," Tillich framed this lost dimension—the dimension of depth—in terms of our relationship with nature:

Modern man is neither more pious nor more impious than man in any other period. The loss of the dimension of depth is caused by the relation of man to his world and to himself in our period, the period in which nature is being subjected scientifically and technically to the control of man. In this period, life in the dimension of depth is replaced by life in the horizontal dimension.⁶

Here Tillich uses the spatial metaphor "horizontal" to characterize humanity's evolving consciousness during the rise of industrialization. Ceaselessly driving forward and transforming the world (the horizontal) with a newfound form of reasoning he alternately calls "controlling," "scientific," or "technical," humanity's concerns in this period shifted toward the process of objectifying the world, withdrawing any sense of sacredness from nature: "Beginning with Galileo the mathematically-oriented natural sciences banished the supernatural. Nature becomes purely objective, rational, and technical."⁷ In contrast to this quite rational way of understanding and shaping the world, Tillich points out that life until the Renaissance was characterized more by ontological or existential concerns (the vertical), where "world-consciousness is still embedded in a mystical or ecstatic God-consciousness... [Any] distinction between nature and the supernatural is abolished. Nature is supernatural in quality, and the supernatural is nature itself."⁸

Tillich refers to this pre-scientific form of reason as "existential," "participatory," or "ontological," wherein truth is something discovered by being in some sense involved in, and caring for, the "object" of one's relation, e.g.,

⁵ Paul Tillich, quoted in Tomoaki Fukai, *Paul Tillich—Journey to Japan in 1960* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 68.

⁶ Paul Tillich, "The Lost Dimension in Religion," *The Saturday Evening Post* 230, no. 50 (June 14, 1958).

⁷ Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 128.

⁸ Tillich, 128.

² Paul Tillich, "The World Situation," in *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, ed. J. Mark Thomas (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), 6.

³ James A. Carpenter, *Nature and Grace: Toward an Integral Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 52.

⁴ Carpenter, 81.

nature. This is a significant distinction, because when technical reason gained dominance during the scientific revolution as a special, and in some cases only, way of truly understanding the world, it had vast implications for humanity's growing estrangement from itself and nature. One particular consequence of this shift in consciousness is the myth of the rational mastery of nature—a myth with clear ecological consequences:

The analysis and mastery of nature and of society presuppose a power that exercises mastery. In this connection the following questions arise: Who can exercise such rule? How is it possible that human intelligence can know nature and bring it into its service through this knowledge? And how is it possible for society to be rationally structured? Who is to be responsible for the structuring of society, and what guarantee is there that it will be done rationally?⁹

With the rising ecological crises in the world today, it's not difficult to answer these rhetorical questions he poses. For example, a concrete outcome of this myth of rationality is seen in the simple fact that, in the year 2016 alone, around nine million people died worldwide from pollutants created by human technologies. We might imagine Tillich asking, "What rational creature would create products that are known to inadvertently kill millions of other humans?"

Even with his sharp critique of reason, Tillich understood that scientific/technical reason serves a vital function in humanity's need to be creative and better understand its world; science, for Tillich, is an indispensable and valuable element of our species. The problem arises when this limited form of reasoning is employed alone and without the aid of existential or ontological reason as a balancing force. Under these circumstances, he saw technical reason taking on a life of its own, often leading to the objectification and unnecessary destruction of nature, as well as the dehumanization of the individual person. So rather than seeing the human as a thinking mind, in a body, in an objectified world—a vestige of Descartes and the rationalist philosophy he birthed—Tillich instead saw the human's role more in Heideggerian terms, as a being-in-nature, which emphasizes the embeddedness of the human in the world. This form of consciousness allows for proper respect and care for the natural world supporting us, because here we see ourselves as a natural being, in need of the aesthetic and vital powers nature provides to the human spirit that arises out of it.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 48-49.

Tillich was prescient in recognizing that the more humans understood nature in technical ways and treated it as such—as a storehouse of resources without inherent value, or as a threatening presence to be dominated—the more we would see our spiritual and environmental problems grow. Therefore, he characterized this relentless and often unquestioned destruction of organic life as "demonic," a "structure of destruction" within humanity capable of tearing apart and profaning a prime bearer of the holy, i.e., nature. For this reason, he characterized our existential estrangement leading to the destructive domination of nature as "sin." And by highlighting a specific element of sin as "concupiscence"—often defined as a lower appetite or desire in the human psyche antagonistic to reason—Tillich spoke of the human's "unlimited desire to draw the whole of reality into one's self. It refers to all aspects of man's relationship to himself and to his world."¹⁰

Langdon Gilkey brilliantly contextualizes Tillich's broadened understanding of sin in relation to our ecological problems:

As Tillich would put it, this demonic use and using up of nature bespeaks a deep alienation of human being from itself, from nature, and from its own infinite ground; consequently, it seeks that infinity of meaning, and so seeks itself and its unity, through taking the infinite into itself, by possessing and using the finite infinitely.

Tillich has, in reinterpreting [the category of concupiscence], given it a much wider meaning as the prime symptom of estrangement of human being from the whole world of goods and so of nature—and as the key 'sin' of our technical, commercial culture.¹¹

Sin should not be seen primarily in its narrow conception as the breaking of religious or moral commandments. Rather, it should be widened and understood as the inherent existential estrangement in humanity, splitting the self apart from its healthy, centered, essential nature and its source, namely, God.

Tillich captured the danger and significance of this estrangement from nature with two philosophical concepts: "forwardism" and "means-ends distortion." Again framing his insights in the spatial metaphors of the horizontal and vertical, he unveiled the deep spiritual issues surrounding our obsessive scientific and technical drive ahead in the horizontal dimension, producing

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 52.

¹¹ Langdon Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 184-85.

and consuming the novelties we create out of the natural world, without stopping to ask the vital vertical question: For what?

[A] more longtime spiritual danger has resulted from the alliance of science and technology. It has caused the perversion of means and ends. It enabled man to produce tools without limits and to make this production into an end itself. In this way it suppressed the question of an end, of the meaning not only of the process of production and consumption (under the control of advertisement), but of life as such. The feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness in innumerable people is a result of this perversion.¹²

Here Tillich anticipates the contemporary "deep ecology" movement, which insistently questions humanity's use of nature to fulfill its needs and desires. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, the "father" of deep ecology, addressing the pointed difference between a *vital need* of humanity and a *nonvital desire*, shows that "the complicated question concerning how industrial societies can increase energy production with the least undesirable consequences is largely a waste of time if this increase is pointless in relation to ultimate human ends."¹³ Extending this analysis, Tillich points out that technologies in modern consumer culture often provide for manufactured, shallow desires that have been created through advertising. Many of these desires necessitate massive destruction of organic nature and have concrete, negative impacts on humanity's spiritual being. Therefore, in order to really understand how technology plays such a predominant role in the loss of meaning in human culture—and contributes to innumerable ecological, health, and spiritual problems—it's important to examine Tillich's conception of "spirit" itself.

Tillich is committed to the principle that our relationship to nature is a large determinant of the quality and depth of our spiritual lives, and not just a meaningless backdrop to it. Therefore, every technological problem fundamentally altering our place in nature should be approached, first and foremost, from a spiritual perspective. And since he saw the unique spiritual dimension in our species principally defined as a union of *power* and *meaning*, technology should be understood as a material extension of our power over nature in an effort to not only provide for our needs, but also realize deeper meaning. As

¹² Paul Tillich, "Science and the Contemporary World in the View of a Theologian," in *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, ed. J. Mark Thomas (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), 177.

¹³ Arne Næss, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), 194.

such, technology has an internally projected purpose (meaning) before it has a practical use (power). And Tillich anticipates insights from the somewhat new field of ecopsychology when he points out a primary spiritual and psychological danger arising from unquestioned technology: "We aspire to rule nature through the machine. But it would seem that the machine is adjusting us to its reality, instead of man adjusting the machine to his own being."¹⁴

Tillich alludes to the shifting nature of modern consciousness that accompanies industrialization. In this new technical consciousness humanity often fails to ask ultimate questions behind the technologies it creates, or whether or not these technologies truly serve the psychological/spiritual, ecological, or social/cultural health of itself and its world. Instead, technologies are created simply because they can be, and then the transitory concerns surrounding them demand more and more of our attention and consume our lives in almost religious ways. In the wake of this technological obsession we are left with a multitude of problems to confront, many of which Tillich himself addressed: space exploration and the conquest (and pollution) of space, while deep social, ecological, and economic needs remain unmet on earth; pursuit of "virtual" reality and the colonization of other planets while, or because, actual reality (our planet) is increasingly destroyed by our own hands; the prospect of the annihilation of all life through nuclear war; worldwide computer networking and robotics manufacturing for increased economic efficiency, often leading to mass unemployment and the more efficient destruction of nature.

No matter what realm of existence he is analyzing, throughout Tillich's writings we sense his conviction that empathizing with, and defending, nature is of vital importance to the human spirit, bringing great depth and meaning to our experience of life itself. That's why he often spoke passionately, particularly in his sermons, of the suffering of nature at the hands of humans:

Sympathy with nature in its tragedy is not a sentimental emotion; it is a true feeling of the reality of nature. Schelling justly says: 'A veil of sadness is spread over all nature, a deep unappeasable melancholy over all life.' According to him this is 'manifest through the traces of suffering in the face of all nature, especially in the faces of the animals.' The doctrine of suffering as the character of all life, taught by the Buddha, has conquered large sections of mankind.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, "Religious Dimensions of Contemporary Art," in *On Art and Architecture*, eds. John and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 180.

But only he who is connected in his own being with the ground of nature is able to see into its tragedy.¹⁵

This empathy for nature ultimately drew Tillich into developing his unique and holistic *Lebensphilosophie*, which he terms the “multidimensional unity of life.”

Tillich credits Albert Schweitzer’s radical “reverence for life” as having largely inspired his own life philosophy:

I have come to the idea that every theology which separates men from nature is completely mistaken. Nature participates in man and men participate in nature, and for this reason I feel now more than in earlier years the impact of Schweitzer’s idea of the inviolability of life. I even have a large section in the forthcoming third volume of my Systematic Theology under the title, ‘The Inviolability of Life.’¹⁶

Of course, we now know that Tillich instead called this section of his system “Life and the Spirit,” and it’s here he develops his most significant contribution to environmental—and even animal—ethics for us today.

In this part of his system, Tillich attempts to debunk hierarchical understandings of life in the modern age that have led to our increased alienation from, and desecration of, the natural world. Conceived as a challenge to the mechanistic and dualistic theories put forth by Western materialist science, positivist philosophy, and religious fundamentalism—which we see today increasing its attacks on science, reason, and nature—Tillich hopes to unveil the “unity and diversity of life in its essential nature” by examining the evolutionary continuum of the life process. In doing so, he opens us to a more holistic and empathetic approach to *all life*. He starts by fleshing out the objectifying outcome of seeing humanity on a different level “above” nature, something which has created dire consequences for nature and nonhuman beings.

In an effort to counteract the problems of such objectification, Tillich wants to replace the metaphor “level” with the metaphor “dimension.” The reason for this replacement, Tillich explains, is that the term “level” is a “metaphor which emphasizes the equality of all objects belonging to a particular level. They are ‘leveled,’ that is, brought to a common plane and kept on it.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 82.

¹⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Theological Significance of Schweitzer*, January 11, 1959, 8, transcript, archives of the Albert Schweitzer Institute for Humanities, Quinnipiac University, Hamden.

There is no organic movement from one to the other; the higher is not implicit in the lower, and the lower is not implicit in the higher.”¹⁷

Perhaps the clearest theological expression of this hierarchical view is the “Great Chain of Being.” Each existing being is clearly demarcated and assigned a degree of value based on its level, starting at the top with God as the ultimate being, and then descending down to angels, humans, animals, plants, minerals, and so on. This classical religious view was later supplanted during the Enlightenment with another hierarchical vision of life through the rise of scientific knowledge. Replacing God with the human mind or consciousness, reality is here composed of different levels—the physical, biological, chemical, and mental—all of which are thought to be reducible down to the interaction of inorganic processes (scientific reductionism). Tillich sees both these religious and scientific views as mistaken.

He believed that when existence is cognitively arranged according to levels, it is easy for humanity to see everything nonhuman simply as an object for manipulation and commodification. Therefore, Tillich posits the totality of *being* as the primary reality humans must grasp in order to understand and appreciate the fundamental unity and sanctity of all dimensions of life; and in Tillich’s holistic vision, all the dimensions of existence intersect in one point, namely, Being-Itself. For this reason, he emphasizes the ontological importance of this symbolic replacement, speaking of a “dimension” as

a geometrical metaphor which has its merits, and as every metaphor, its limits. I have made a crusade for this metaphor against the other spatial metaphor, levels. Level puts basic realities, body and mind, culture and religion, world and God above each other....

But this imagery is wrong. These basic realities are within each other. And this is what the metaphor dimension conveys, for dimensions cross each other in one point without interfering with each other.¹⁸

Then Tillich makes explicit the ethical consequences of this metaphorical shift: “The significant thing...is not the replacement of one metaphor by another but *the changed vision of reality* which such replacement expresses.”¹⁹ In other words, how we define life conditions how we view, interact with, and

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 13.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, “Religion and Art in the Light of the Contemporary Development,” in *On Art and Architecture*, ed. by John and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 166.

¹⁹ Tillich, 166, (emphasis mine).

ultimately treat life, and so "it is obvious that the use of the metaphor 'level' is a matter not of inadequacy alone but of decision about the problems of human existence."²⁰ This is why Tillich's multidimensional unity of life is highly relevant to environmental ethics today; his life philosophy is meant to lead to a shift not only in one's consciousness, but also in one's actions. It is a call to concern for *all life*, not just human life.

In order to confront our conceptualization and treatment of life, Tillich had to address one of the primary scientific, religious, and philosophical problems inherent in hierarchical "levels" thinking:

The question of the relation of the organic to the inorganic 'level' of nature leads to the recurrent problem of whether biological processes can be fully understood through the application of methods used in mathematical physics or whether a teleological principle must be used to explain the inner-directedness of organic growth.²¹

Tillich rejected the first method of understanding life, which we know as scientific materialism or reductionism, by calling it an "ontology of death." This belief system takes even primary phenomenal experiences like human consciousness—the basis of our comprehending and expressing reality—and reduces it to nothing but chemical and neural processes. It would explain, for instance, psychological depression as nothing but chemical reactions in the human body, leaving out of the equation what the actual *feeling* or *meaning* of depression is—the two components of depression most important to someone actually experiencing it. This is why Tillich was so opposed to the growing drive of scientific reason toward scientism. In scientism, the extension of scientific principles is applied to all matters of life, with the conviction that nothing outside of the purview of science can provide ultimate meanings about the nature or structure of human existence and the universe. Ironically, since science itself cannot either verify or falsify this belief, we can say, with Tillich, that such a position is itself philosophical, or quasi-religious—not scientific.

Tillich's multidimensional approach to life also caused him to reject the second method of levels thinking, which is known historically as *vitalism*. In opposition to scientific reductionism, which seeks to explain the complexity of life by breaking it down to its most basic elements, vitalism instead introduces a supernatural, nonmaterial force into the life process. For Tillich, this method also disrupts the natural, emergent nature of life's multidimensional unity. It creates a worldview in which humans are not seen as a part of nature

²⁰ Tillich, 14.

²¹ Tillich, 14.

but are instead above it because they are in some sense imbued with, and controlled by, a supernatural power.

His criticisms of these narrow scientific and philosophical/religious approaches led Tillich to instead conceive of life in a way that has deep significance for our valuation of nonhuman life forms. We see this most fundamentally in his widened redefining of life itself, wherein he rejects the reductionist idea that the inorganic dimension is not a part of life: "Just like every other dimension, the inorganic belongs to life, and it shows the integratedness and the possible disintegration of life in general."²² Tillich considers this universal concept of life as "unavoidable" and says that it "liberates the word [life] from its bondage to the organic realm."²³ This anticipates future environmental philosophy and ecotheology, and challenges the historical anthropocentric bias of Christian theology that has caused much of humanity to see both nonhuman organic life (e.g., animals) and the inorganic dimension of reality as relatively unimportant or meaningless.

Tillich goes even further and turns anthropocentrism on its head by elevating the ontological status of this dimension: "the inorganic has a preferred position...in so far as it is the first condition for the actualization of every dimension. This is why all realms of being would dissolve were the basic condition provided by the constellation of inorganic structures to disappear."²⁴ The ecological and religious implications of this statement should not be underestimated. This basic truism—that our species would not even exist without sound inorganic and organic dimensions supporting us—is something now thrust upon us by ecological crises, and Tillich drives this point home forcefully.

When he speaks of the inorganic dimension's "preferred position," Tillich is not saying that the inorganic is more important than humans in a moral, valuational sense—a complaint fundamentalist Christians often make against those who show a deep concern for defending nonhuman animals and the intrinsic value of organic nature. Rather, he is simply highlighting the inorganic's ontological status as the fundamental conditioning dimension of all the others—without it, nothing in the universe would exist. The modern world's lack of insight into these simple scientific and existential facts is quickly contributing to our current ecological troubles, and Tillich wants to show that the "spirit" actualized in our being—a defining, unique component of the human being—is only made possible due to the material of which we

²² Tillich, 34.

²³ Tillich, 12.

²⁴ Tillich, 19.

are composed and which supports our being, i.e., nature. In short, Tillich believes that the spirit in humanity cannot be separated from the inorganic and organic dimensions through which this spirit is actualized. Spirit, in other words, arises as a unique dimension of life in an evolutionary and organic way: "In the inorganic, the spiritual is present. In the spiritual, the inorganic is present, and both in the organic. I could say with most of the progressive biologists and neurologists that man's spiritual dimension is present in every cell of his body.... You cannot separate them."²⁵

For Tillich, words like "spirit" or "soul" do not denote things that exist in a material sense, and thus he does not see the emergence of spirit as a supernatural act of a divine being who interferes in the laws of the natural world. Instead, spirit is a dimension of life that arises organically through the evolutionary processes of nature. He even suggests the potential of spirit arising in other beings by saying that "within the reach of present human experience, this has happened only in man. The question of whether it has happened anywhere else in the universe cannot yet be answered positively or negatively."²⁶ Tillich's evolutionary approach to the life process allows him to envision the possible future development of spirit in other beings, thus anticipating what modern science now teaches us about the evolving complexity of nonhuman animal emotions, cognition, and intentionality. For Tillich, the openness of the evolutionary process implies—however difficult it may be to imagine—the possibility of other animal beings gaining new dimensions of consciousness, meaning we cannot set an absolute boundary line between ourselves and other species who led up to the development of our own species, or even those who may come after us. After all, we have to remember our own evolutionary origins.

Tillich's appreciation for nature is fundamentally based on the organic and inorganic continuum holding all life together in an ultimate unity. And today, millions of people share his appreciation for nature and its nonhuman beings by showing serious concern for the psychological and physical suffering of all beings who share in existence. His thought provides a sound philosophical, religious, and scientific grounding for this growing ethical concern for other beings who do not fully embody what he calls the spirit dimension, but who nonetheless approach it.

Tillich even highlights our intuitive, precognitive relation with nonhuman animals when he speaks of our "ability to participate empathetically in

the psychological self of even the highest animals in such a way that, for example, [we] can fully understand psychological health and disease."²⁷ What he intimates is that while many of the so-called "higher" animals (e.g., dolphins, chimpanzees, elephants) do not fully embody what he terms the spiritual dimension, they do clearly exhibit intentionality and self-actualization, and thus contain the potential for expressing and experiencing a sense of meaning beyond what we've previously thought.

I believe he is correct to remain open on this point. Current neurocognitive data from animal studies show that many animals embody a sense of purposiveness and meaning beyond mere stimulus and response reactions. We have come a long way from Descartes' view of animals as mere machines, and in his 1997 address to the North American Paul Tillich Society, Durwood Foster recounted a fascinating story confirming Tillich's position on this matter:

Some of us wanted to go fishing.... They were said to be biting over in the bay. We assumed Paulus [Tillich] was coming, and it seemed to be so when we met at the Tillichs' house to deploy. But on hearing the talk of fishing, Paulus' mood changed. One could wonder if this was linked to other reactions of avoidance, or dread, toward the animal world. But the tack he took was to indict, quite vehemently, our Ritschlian attitude of callously exploiting nature, turning everything into a mere thing to be used. He was totally sincere about this, whatever was afoot in the dread. We argued we planned to eat the fish, if we caught any, and harvesting the game was essential for its own well-being. Paulus wasn't impressed. He stayed home. And when we got to the water, no one wanted to fish.²⁸

In the end, Tillich's vision of the multidimensional unity of life should lead us to question our personal stances toward the natural world, and thus expand our sense of moral subjectivity beyond the socio-personal to include a valuation of life in its totality. Without the basic dimensions of life actualized within us (inorganic and organic), our life "of the spirit" would remain in a state of mere potentiality. That said, Tillich still believes that our life in the spiritual and historical dimensions warrants some ontological valuation beyond that of other species; for these dimensions arise from *and* comprehend

²⁵ Paul Tillich, "Thing and Self," in *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), 115.

²⁶ Tillich, 21.

²⁷ Tillich, 37.

²⁸ Durwood Foster, "Afterglows of Tillich," *Newsletter of the North American Paul Tillich Society* 23, no. 1 (January 1997).

all the dimensions conditioning them. On face value, this might seem to betray some anthropocentrism in Tillich's thought, but things are not quite so simple:

Historical man adds the historical dimension to all other dimensions which are presupposed and contained in his being. He is the highest grade from the point of view of valuation, presupposing that the criterion of such value judgment is the power of a being to include a maximum number of potentialities in one living actuality. This is an ontological criterion, according to the rule that value judgments must be rooted in qualities of the objects valued, and it is a criterion which should not be confused with that of perfection. Man is the highest being within the realm of our experience, but he is by no means the most perfect.²⁹

In making this claim Tillich brings together two very significant points: he affirms the ontological significance of humanity, while simultaneously highlighting the moral pitfalls of a prideful anthropocentrism that frequently arises from our unique human dimensions—often causing immense suffering to other humans and the nonhuman beings with whom we share the planet. In short, Tillich lays out the paradoxical essence of humanity's ontological importance and uniqueness, against what he considers the moral perfection of animals: "Perfection means actualization of one's potentialities; therefore, a lower being can be more perfect than a higher one if it is actually what it is potentially. And the highest being—man—can become less perfect than any other, because he not only can fail to actualize his essential being but can deny and distort it."³⁰

Tillich's understanding of morality centers on whether or not humans are actualizing their inherent potential, their essential self, through acts of love—what he describes as "the reunion of the separated." And for Tillich, our essential self is revealed when we attempt to overcome existential estrangement and reunite in love, however fragmentarily, with all dimensions of reality—including ourselves, others, God, and the natural world of which we are a part. This explains why he sees the significance of our species not only in the physical and cognitive powers we possess, but also in the moral maturity we are capable of, ultimately forcing us to account for the way we use the unique abilities we've been given. With clear implications for ecological and

²⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 17.

³⁰ Tillich, 36.

animal ethics, Tillich highlights this moral challenge inherent in our uniqueness: "Animals...are completely bound to the actual and acting situation in which they find themselves. They are in the bondage of all nature. This bondage makes their special character, their perfection. They cannot destroy themselves in the way that man can."³¹

Tillich never faltered in his calls for humanity to respect and reunite with nature. This makes him the antipode of other-worldly religious thinkers who see nature as insignificant to our spiritual lives, or even insignificant to the creative ground of nature, God. This is largely due to his multidisciplinary approach to reality, utilizing science, theology, philosophy, history, psychology, and aesthetics to analyze human consciousness and action. Through all these lenses, and always with reference to the eternal and our relation to it, he shows us how to see the natural world as a bearer of the holy. His vision is of a deeper understanding of existence, one able to comprehend what is truly meaningful, authentic, and intrinsically worthy across all dimensions of life—not just human life. And while he lifted up and affirmed the spiritual value and ontological significance of our species, he also brought us back down into the realm of nature by issuing stark rebukes of anthropocentrism and anti-evolutionary (in religion) and reductionist (in science) views of life. At a time when humanity is desperately in need of a new vision toward nature and our place in it, this makes his insights relevant, challenging, and deeply useful.

Much more could be said of Tillich's ongoing relevance to our ecological situation, but perhaps it's important to conclude by saying something about the growing number of Christians today who see their salvation [*salvus*: to heal and make whole] as a personal event unrelated to other nonhuman beings and the natural world which supports them. Tillich had strong words against this position, and he asked us to believe, and act, with the conviction that the symbol of salvation inextricably links our fate to the fate of nature: "For there is no salvation of man if there is no salvation of nature, for man is in nature and nature is in man."³² This idea of universal salvation, which he termed "eschatological pan-en-theism," envisions everything temporal (including nature) as coming from the eternal and returning to the eternal. It's a challenging symbol to those who unnecessarily and wantonly harm others, nature, or its many nonhuman beings, because it emphasizes in both physical and spiritual terms the vital importance of our concrete actions in the world. In a stark and uncompromising warning, Tillich challenges us to believe with him that the quest for salvation has deep significance for the present moment—for us and

³¹ Tillich, "Thing and Self," 116-17.

³² Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 84.

for all of nature—and not just for some personal spiritual experience or place beyond the world.

The bodiless spirit...is not the aim of creation; the purpose of salvation is not the abstract intellect or a natureless moral personality. Do we not see everywhere the estrangement of people from nature, from their own natural forces and from nature around them? And do they not become dry and uncreative in their mental life, hard and arrogant in their moral attitude, suppressed and poisoned in their vitality? They certainly are not the images of salvation.³³

³³ Tillich, 85.

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PAUL TILlich'S IDEAS AND METHODS CONTINUE TO INSPIRE AND GUIDE students, teachers, and professionals in all fields. He crosses boundaries between the academy and the community, religions and spiritualities, cultures and societies, taking leaders deeper and further than they ever imagined.

Each essay explores another facet of Tillich's influence in education, religion, popular culture, science, health, social reform, and political action. They are chosen to be "snapshots" of his ongoing influence, accessible to both undergraduate and graduate students, and relevant to corporate and non-profit leaders alike.

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