

Notes on and selections from *Silent Spring* (1962)

The book begins with “A fable for Tomorrow,” the first line of which suggests that harmony with nature is the “good” in an ethical sense, the heart of her axiology: “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings.” (p. 1)

Then, after telling a story about a chemical blight that brought mass death and sickness to the town, including the disappearance of birds, and “a spring without voices,” she writes, “No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it to themselves.” (p. 3) (Clearly, she was no self-conscious pagan!) She then indicates that the book is about the countless examples around the world where this story is becoming the reality.

Early in the work she quotes the ecologist Paul Shepard, “The place of nature in man's world,” *Atlantic Monthly*, v. 13 (April-June 1958, 85-89), who asked why we “would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?” Commenting, Carson asserts this is the kind of world toward which we are moving: “Such a world is pressed upon us” (p. 12).

She does make a strong ethical argument, but usually grounds it anthropocentrically, assuming a kind of virtue ethics, wondering about what the kinds of attitudes and practices which is so cavalier toward life says about and does to our character

“Incidents like the eastern Illinois spraying raise a question that is not only scientific but moral. The question is whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized” (p. 99).

“By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being?” (p. 100)

She does not articulate a no-compromise perspective, however, with regard to biocides: “It is not my contention that chemical insecticides must never be used” (p. 12), but concludes that, at best, they should be considered stop-gap measures on the way to permanent solutions (p. 296) including the introduction of other species that could control damaging ones (p. 296). That she indicates little if any uncertainty about introducing non-native species as agents of control is both an indication that alarm about such introductions had yet to arise and another indication that she had not fully rejected the control paradigm.

Some of this is also clear in her concluding paragraphs, beginning on p. 296,

“It is not surprising that the island of Newfoundland, which has no native shrews but is beset with sawflies, so eagerly desired some of these small, efficient mammals that in 1958 the introduction of the masked shrew – the most efficient sawfly predator – was attempted. Canadian officials report in 1962 that the attempt has been successful. The shrews are multiplying and are spreading out over the island, some marked individuals having been recovered as much as ten miles from the point of release.

There is, then, a whole battery of armaments available to a forester who is willing to look for permanent solutions that preserve and strengthen the natural relations in the forest. Chemical pest control is at best a stopgap measure bringing no real solution, at worst killing the fishes in the forest streams, bringing on plagues of insects, and destroying the natural controls and those we may be trying to introduce. By such violent measures, says Dr. Ruppertshofen, ‘the partnership for life of the forest is entirely being unbalanced, and the catastrophes caused by parasites repeat in shorter and shorter periods . . . We, therefore, have to put an end to these unnatural manipulations brought into the most important and almost last natural living space which has been left for us.’

Through all these new, imaginative and creative approaches to the problem of sharing our earth with other creatures there runs a constant theme, the awareness that we are dealing with life – with living populations and all their pressures and counter-pressures, their surges and recessions. Only by taking account of such life forces and by cautious seeking to guide them into channels favorable to ourselves can we hope to achieve a reasonable accommodation between the insect hordes and ourselves. {end p. 296]

The current vogue for poisons has failed utterly to take into account these most fundamental considerations. As crude a weapon as the cave man's club, the chemical barrage has been hurled against the fabric of life – a fabric on the one hand delicate and destructible, on the other miraculously tough and resilient, and capable of striking back in unexpected ways. These extraordinary capacities of life have been ignored by the practitioners of chemical control who have brought to their task no “hi-minded orientation,” no humility before the vast forces with which they tamper.

The “control of nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concepts and practices of applied entomology for the most part date from that Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.

Here (p. 297) the book ends, apparently short of some contemporary biocentrism, for the value of the insects within the wider ecological system does not seem to be fully appreciated (e.g., all the calories they provide to the birds she hopes to save but who may decline in population if introduced species reduce dramatically their usual food sources). But overall she seems to anticipate and desire a comprehensive rejection of the ideology of control, and helped set the stage for more comprehensive consideration of its impact on the earth's living systems.

Pagination is from the 1994 edition, which includes an introduction by then Vice President Al Gore (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).

The book was dedicated as follows:

To Albert Schweitzer who said
“Man has lost the capacity to foresee
and to forestall. He will end
by destroying the earth”