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Response to McFague

David Hopper
Macalester College

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Response

David Hopper

Our present ecological, environmental consciousness is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is important to establish the historical background of the development of this awareness, this consciousness, in order to gain perspective on how we talk about it—what kind of hopes and solutions we can entertain with regard to the problems that occasion our current concerns. Professor McFague did not do this in her paper, so let me provide some historical basis for our discussion. It is important to establish such a background in order to assess and respond to Professor McFague's ideas. I will then follow this historical excursus with a summation of what I take to be the main lines of Professor McFague's argument, followed by a critique thereof. I will conclude with a very brief statement of my own views on the subject at hand.

I. Historical Background

Many see Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*¹ as a turning point in the development of broad, public consciousness and concern about the natural environment. Carson eloquently described the destructive impact of the agricultural use of DDT on the food chain and various animal populations, especially birds. In the aftermath of the dropping of the two atomic bombs at the end of World War II, the world woke to a new reality: the possibility of human, social self-destruction. This new concern about potential destruction was subsequently caught up in, and accentuated by, the political East-West struggle—the Cold War. What Rachel Carson accomplished with her book was to parallel the new awareness of potential, catastrophic destruction through war with her own description of a real and growing destruction of elements of the natural world through commonplace, seemingly benign, agricultural practices. General awareness of other technological abuses of nature came to light during the Vietnam years of 1965–72. Those years helped to spawn an antitechnology “counterculture” movement that contributed in turn, in 1970, to the institution of the first Earth Day event, a broadly reported protest celebration designed to promote appreciation and preservation of the natural environment.

Then in 1973, the Arab-Israeli War led to an embargo by the Arab nations on oil shipments to the West, forcing widespread recognition

of the growing dependency upon and competition for the world's limited natural resources. In the following year, the shortage of chemical fertilizers, an offshoot of the energy crisis, aggravated greatly the serious crop failures in the Soviet Union, India, and elsewhere, which made for a worldwide food shortage. In the course of this 1973–75 energy and food crisis, ethical debate in the West, and also in the Third World, erupted around the ideas of triage and "lifeboat ethics." Aid to poor countries, some argued, should be made conditional upon steps to limit population growth. Within the developed countries, especially in the United States, some voices called for radical cutbacks in extravagant lifestyles, major reductions in consumption, and the adoption of what was at the time called "voluntary simplicity," a lifestyle that extolled the idea that "less can be more." Subsequently, scientific monitoring of the earth's atmosphere from bases in Antarctica and by means of satellite observations during the 1980s and 1990s established the now widely accepted fact of an increasing degradation of the earth's atmosphere in terms both of the thinning of its ozone layer and the accumulation of greenhouse gases. Recent international conferences have stressed the need to address these problems and the likelihood of impending significant climate changes as a result of such atmospheric changes. This cluster of scientific and historical events lies behind the growing general concern about dangers to, and the need to preserve, the health of planet earth.

It is important to consider, as a second feature of this history, an additional scholarly contribution, one that followed closely the work of Rachel Carson and that added a significant new dimension to the ethical discussion of the environmental question. Well *before* the onset of the 1973–75 energy and food crisis, historian Lynn White Jr., in two essays written four years apart, offered a historical analysis that provided and continues to provide a provocative interpretation of ethical, theological dimensions of the ecological problem. In the first essay, "What Accelerated Technological Progress in the Western Middle Ages?" White, with abundant historical evidence, argued that the Western Middle Ages underwent a significant, accelerating technological development during the sixth through the fifteenth centuries, a cumulative change that placed the peoples of Western Europe in the forefront of technological development and innovation by the end of that period.² This transformation occurred in stages and in diverse economic-political arenas: first in agriculture, then in military technology, and, finally and most impressively, in the exploitation of the natural

forces of wind and water for production purposes. Windmills and waterwheels sprang up all over Northern Europe from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries. First adapted extensively for milling grains, waterwheels were applied to sawing lumber, cutting stone, even polishing precious gems. White hypothesized — on the model of Max Weber's exploration of the roots of modern capitalism — that special features in Western Christianity, different from the Christianity of the East, underlay what he regarded as a strikingly distinctive economic-historical development.

One of the factors White identified as playing a key role in this development was the rise of the cult of saints, which, he suggested, gradually displaced traditional, tribal, animistic beliefs and practices. This development, White proposed, encouraged a generalized disenchantment of nature. He argued, in addition, that Western monasticism distinctively developed an integration of work and piety not found in Eastern Christianity or elsewhere. He suggested that the integration of physical labor with scholarly work in the monastic communities of the West made those communities into centers of technological innovation and diffusion. As he expressed it in 1963, "The monks were the first large group of intellectuals to get dirt under their fingernails: surely a fact related to the growth of technology."³ He concluded that this combination of factors led to an ethos that sought to substitute, wherever possible, a power machine for forms of human labor regarded as demeaning for a "child of God."

White expressed a very positive picture of the development of technology in the West and attempted to underscore the humane motivations that inspired it. Four years later, however, White's mood and outlook abruptly changed. In 1967, he published a very influential and widely quoted article titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."⁴ In this later piece, White blamed Christianity (and less explicitly Judaism) for the current ecological crisis, saying that its disregard for nature led to the degradation of the environment. White singled out for note Genesis 1:28, in which God tells Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."⁵ In the context of this quotation, White broadly asserted, "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."⁶ He suggested that the ecological crisis would continue until

there was a revision, or abandonment, of the “Christian axiom” that nature’s chief function was to serve the needs of humankind.

One is prompted to ask at this point: What occasioned this striking turnaround in White’s point of view? A possible explanation — apart from the growing technological angst expressed by Rachel Carson along with the antitechnology declamations of the 1962 Berkeley-centered Student Power Movement — was a very prominent theological celebration of secularity and the disenchantment of nature found in Harvey Cox’s 1965 bestseller *The Secular City*. It is not often that a theological work makes it to the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, but Cox’s book accomplished that feat and stirred widespread discussion in 1965–66. Cox argued that the dynamic, liberating life of the modern-day “secular city,” in contrast to restrictive town life, had positive religious roots and that twentieth-century Christians should lay aside the guilt-inducing notion that every human relationship should manifest “I-Thou” dimensions. Along with the major themes of a “desacralization of politics” and a “deconsecration of values,” Cox argued that the Biblical account of creation inspired a “disenchantment of nature,” a development that freed at least a portion of humanity from the religious anxiety of a continuing need to placate a nature-based spirit world.

It is speculative, but plausible, to suggest that Lynn White’s change of mind about a “disenchantment of nature” was in part a reaction to Cox’s overexuberant celebration of secularity. White’s counter, in his 1967 article, was a proposal to encourage a “re-enchantment” of nature. He expressed regret at the loss of certain aspects of primitive animism, a loss which, he concluded, fostered “indifference to the feelings of natural objects.” Against such an attitude, he put forward the figure of St. Francis of Assisi. The thirteenth-century founder of the Franciscan order was offered as model of a respectful, even worshipful, attitude toward and relationship with nature. Widespread theological discussion followed the publication of White’s article, especially in the context of the Vietnam War. Certainly, White’s influential articles played a role in helping to initiate interest in and concern for an “ecologically sound” theology. His call for a re-enchantment of nature has met with positive responses from a number of theologians and ethicists while also furthering awareness among a broader, more-informed public.

As suggested earlier, however, the later, worldwide energy and food crisis of 1973–75 triggered an additional round of debate. Some

ecologically concerned persons spoke out at the time against long-term programs of food aid to needy nations. The 1973–75 crisis seemed to portend an enduring problem, which some felt would only be accentuated by ongoing efforts at food relief for overpopulated areas around the world, especially in the Third World countries with the highest population growth rates. By using the image of an overcrowded lifeboat, some suggested that the effort to rescue everyone would only end in capsizing the lifeboat itself. The ecologically concerned biologist Garret Hardin provoked international controversy by suggesting this lifeboat metaphor, one which implied that the affluent, economically developed nations of the world were the decision-making occupants of the lifeboat. Hardin argued that the well-being and survival of posterity called for difficult decisions about population control of peoples and nations who had exhausted the carrying capacity of their environments. At international population and food conferences in 1973 and 1974, representatives from Third World countries rejected Hardin's propositions and replied that developed nations were consuming a disproportionate share of the earth's resources. Philosophical and religious ethicists made the issues of survival and justice the main focus of these discussions.

I suggest that, with his earlier analysis of technological development, White posed and paradigmatically framed the key problem of the relationship between ecology and justice. For White, however, technological advance, the bearer of his 1963 justice concerns, was called into question by his later ecological convictions, which he felt needed to be addressed by altering spiritual perceptions about the natural environment. What is of special note about these ethical debates in the 1970s is that arguments and counterarguments about survival and justice were framed in the face of an immediate crisis that was perceived to have long-term import.

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This short history of a relatively recent discussion of ecology-and-justice issues provides background for consideration of Professor McFague's paper. Many of the questions she raises and solutions she proposes have a history that extends back at least thirty years. What is new to the present discussion is the reality of the further development of a global economy, which has made for a much greater degree of economic interdependence, with new centers of economic power in Asia

and elsewhere. This growing interdependence makes improbable the talk about triage and lifeboat ethics that occurred in the 1970s. What is also new is that the shift to the problem of climate change has, in turn, altered important features of the debate. Climate changes are global and impact all peoples in a variety of different ways. The climate question is likely to renew a worldwide concern about food supplies *if* global warming proceeds apace. Major themes struck in the 1970s debate about energy and food clearly carry over to the climate question.

Professor McFague, however, also brings to the discussion of ecology the added dimension of more recent ecofeminist concerns about ecology and justice. Here, she forges a link—one found in liberation theologies—between the survival question and the equity question as it pertains to the situation of the poor and oppressed. She sees the ecological issue joined to the situation of the “poor Third World woman... of color”—the latter certainly a real and pressing ethical question. She suggests that the situation of the poor woman of color is a “barometer of the health of humanity *and* of nature” (*italics mine*).⁷ The ecofeminist argument that she offers is that the treatment of women in any society is a correlate, an index, of the treatment of nature in that same society; i.e., it is attributable to a male gender bias among the power elite of the developed, economically dominant nations. Professor McFague describes the poverty-bound woman of the Third World in the following terms: “She does not have the power to direct the planet’s dwindling resources for her own use. In her increasing poverty, we see also the growing poverty of the earth.”⁸ Professor McFague goes on to say that “the male gaze, the anthropocentric gaze, and the colonial gaze are similar.”⁹ With such phrasing she associates, if not links, the question of social, gender injustice to the abuse of the environment.

What I take to be the burden of Professor McFague’s discussion of climate change is a call for a changed consciousness with regard to our relationship to the environment. She calls for a heightened human appreciation, especially among people in the developed countries, of the givenness of the natural world and a lessening of our exploitative disposition toward that world. Overall, Professor McFague offers a number of different solutions for altering Christian, First World and general human consciousness about the natural environment and the correlative issue of social justice.

In addressing Christians and people of Biblical persuasion, Professor McFague seeks to counter the negative impress of Lynn White’s

focus upon Genesis 1:28 and its injunction to humans to “subdue the earth” and exercise “dominion” over animal life. She proposes instead the idea that the frequent mention in the Genesis account of God looking upon the various acts of creation and declaring them “good” enjoins people to enjoy aesthetically the world of nature. Thus, in place of the mandates of dominion and subjugation, Professor McFague proposes aesthetic appreciation. Referring to her own personal childhood experiences with nature, she suggests that an innate love of nature is fixed in all of us and that this innate love needs only to be unleashed or cultivated in order to better our appreciation of the world and to allay our tendency to exploit and abuse nature. Such a shift in consciousness or disposition, she suggests, would then undergird a resolve by Christian people—and others as well—to deal more actively and personally with problems posed by the ecological crisis. This meaning is brought home with a quote from the Dalai Lama to the effect that “human beings have a ‘natural affection’ for the earth....”¹⁰

To accent this theme Professor McFague adds other appeals as well. At one point, she seems to fall back on prescriptive admonition as a means of correcting current behavior. In response to a developing consensus within the scientific community on the matter of global warming, she urges her hearers “to get out of denial and act. At the very least... to stabilize emissions in order to avert the most severe climate impacts.” And, she says, “since we created the problem, presumably, we can do something about it. We can improve energy efficiency,... But we must have the *will* to act.”¹¹ And later, in connection with the nature-embracing spirituality she proposes, she says that “a *will to change* is a critical first step toward such a spirituality.”¹² There are important ethical differences between prescriptive admonition, aesthetic appreciation, and/or an innate love of nature, but all are appealed to as components of a proposed alteration of behavior and outlook.

Aware that there is significant difference between a prescriptive call to conscience and aesthetic enjoyment, Professor McFague softens the tone of the former by restoring perhaps a third or fourth motivational source for changing attitudes toward the environment. This I would term a kind of personalistic appeal. She notes that a World Council of Churches study advocates “strong legislation, fear of consequences, lobbying groups,” and the inner “pressure of conscience” as actions necessary to change—but then she says that she would add the inner pressure “of love.” “People,” she remarks, “do change some because

they feel they must, but they change most when they want to. We need a transformation of heart and soul, not just of will—we need a transformation of how we see our place in the scheme of things.”¹³ Here Professor McFague proposes the central point in her argument: that we must transform our consciousness from one dominated by a subject-object mindset to a subject-subjects mindset. By the latter, she means that our consciousness should take on a personalistic, relational orientation that takes in not only other human subjects but the subjecthood of all aspects of nature: animal and plant, organic and inorganic. By this I take Professor McFague to be embracing a project of consciousness alteration, a kind of Enlightenment doctrine of human salvation through human design, in this case not so much a reshaping of the social order as with the French *philosophes*, but of our own internal environment, our consciousness, as a means of assuring a happy, “abundant” future.

II. The Subject-Object Problem

I believe what I have outlined above is a fair representation of Professor McFague’s argument. Let me now turn to some questions about and rejoinders to her paper. I respond to three points—points I believe to be of general interest and not overly arcane in a theological sense. At the start, however, let me say that I have a little trouble with the metaphor of “the loving eye vs. the arrogant eye.” It lacks precision for me, since I associate arrogance, rightly or wrongly, with a demeanor more than with a glance or a look. I need some uttered words, or a behavior, in order to identify arrogance. I think I know what is intended by the metaphor, but I believe that it is possible to associate lust with a look at a distance, but less so arrogance. “Locking eyes,” of course, can signify lust as well as love. But then, if we go this way, with lust in place of arrogance, we are very much caught in a general human condition, one in which we all seem involved—rather like covetousness. The Tenth Commandment speaks against covetousness. Luther believed covetousness catches everyone. The metaphor carries Professor McFague’s meaning, but inadequately so.

The first major point of my critique centers on Professor McFague’s denigration of the subject-object relationship, which she and others identify as the chief villain of our time, a source of oppression within both the social and natural order. The second point fixes on her reading of Buber in particular and the tradition of theism in general. And

the third is the consciousness-shaping nature of her project and what I consider to be some limits of such a project.

Let me begin with a discussion — and something of a defense — of the subject-object relationship and examine why it has been blamed as perhaps the major contributing cause of many of our current ecological and social problems. As I understand the chief lines of this argument, it is believed that the delineation of distance from an object of knowledge or another person (as “other”) serves chiefly the function of domination. Such a delineation allows, nay serves, the purpose of manipulation and control of the object and simultaneously functions as *self-enhancement* for the “objectifier.” Descartes (1596–1650) is frequently singled out as being especially guilty of this attitude, since he attempted philosophically to systematize this subject-object reasoning and suggested that not only planetary bodies in the Copernican cosmology should be viewed as functioning on the model of a machine (orderly, predictable motion), but so should animals.

The complaint against the development of subject-centered, objectivist thinking in Western philosophy — along with attitudes and behaviors supposedly instilled by it — was, in the past, most commonly voiced by philosophical advocates of neo-Thomism and Aristotelianism; but, in more recent times, the complaint has been taken up by a number of feminist and postmodernist thinkers who have seen in the subject-object dichotomy an inevitable, exploitative intent and outcome. Without contesting the point that power — social, political, and ideological — is a matter of critical ethical concern and that its concealed modes of operation make it difficult to track, I think it is nonetheless important to try to sort out epistemological from ideological interests and concerns in this matter. And, in regard to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century efforts to achieve distance from inherited schemes of understanding, it is essential to keep in mind the great significance of the cosmological revolution as the context for the work of Descartes.

While it is possible, I suppose, to view the struggle over the Copernican displacement of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic astronomy as some sort of power struggle — as clearly it was vis-à-vis the power of the Church and its efforts to preside over the totality of a culture — it can also be viewed as an honest and, at times, disquieting quest for understanding. The knowledge of how the heavens worked did not have an immediate payoff for exploitative, materialist goals and purposes. That is not to say that Galileo did not turn a nice profit by entering the tele-

scope business, but what I suggest here is that understanding and curiosity about the world is also a human and an ennobling pursuit. The studied attempt to stand back from an inherited world and to try to see things anew was, and is, part of what the subject-object polarity has meant and continues to mean. It is conducive to criticism, even self-criticism. It confronts people at times with the challenging necessity of having to view the world in a way that is counter to their own inclinations and wishes. Sometimes the new way of viewing is a painful, disruptive thing. For example, what I find attractive and provocative about the story of Johannes Kepler and his formulation of the laws of planetary motion is that the three laws he identified did not correspond to what he wanted to find. The idea of elliptical planetary orbits jarred his aesthetic, mystical sensibilities, and he spoke of himself as having laid a huge “cosmic egg.” Albert Camus — a popular writer in our own times — has insightfully remarked, “Seeking what is true is *not* [equivalent to] seeking what is desirable.”¹⁴ By contrast, it is always more comfortable to imagine and live in a world one desires. But then, this has been one of the complaints (Fichte, Marx, Freud) about the illusion-prone disposition of religious people.

In the context of our present discussion of the ethics of global warming, the maintenance of a subject-object rationality promises to play a continuing and necessary role — I would argue, an essential role. In fact, unlike the energy and food crisis of 1973–75, we are presently relying on the subject-object thinking of the scientific community to define the global warming problem before it is too late. And we get anxious about the possibility that tobacco company scientists, inclined to place economic interest ahead of reasoned, objective judgments, may confuse the issues and paralyze action.

Earlier I noted the critical 1963 essay by Lynn White Jr. that identified and brought attention to the European technological revolution of the sixth through the fifteenth centuries, the development which placed Europe at the forefront of technological innovation and development. In making his argument, White contended that over the course of this technological development, Europe underwent a major revision of its attitudes toward nature. With considerable weight of historical evidence, he argued that Europe gradually freed itself from an animistic bondage to nature and increasingly recognized its own potential for “taming” nature. All of this occurred well before the Copernican revolution and Descartes and represented a mundane but pervasive form of pragmatic, subject-object thought processes.

It is helpful to cite a few examples of the evidence that White brings to the table. One example is the peculiar pride in tools that marked the sepulchral art of the Celtic peoples and dated to the third century of the common era. Another is an exhaustive study by sociologist Margaret Holden, which established, convincingly for most scholars, that, as a rule, when technological innovation is accepted in local communities, the acceptance of further technological innovation by those same communities becomes commonplace and tends to accelerate. Holden's study was centered on English parishes from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries, but White argues that such a pattern extended over the whole of Europe and was the case during earlier centuries, when innovation gained acceptance in agriculture, warfare, and early industry. In addition, White calls into evidence the calendars that came into vogue with the time of Charlemagne (A.D. 800). In contrast to the old Roman calendars, which, in White's words, depicted "the months as static personifications bearing symbolic attributes," Carolingian calendars "set the pattern for the Western Middle Ages [and] show a coercive attitude towards natural resources. The pictures change to scenes of ploughing, harvesting, wood-chopping, people knocking down acorns for the pigs, pig-slaughtering. Man and nature," White states, "are two things, and man is master."¹⁵

The work of White makes questionable the most recent criticisms centering on Descartes's articulation of the subject-object cleavage as a root cause of the ecological crisis. By contrast, let me suggest that the post-Copernican hypothesizing in the field of epistemology is more an effort — and a varied one at that — to describe post facto what happened with the revolution in cosmology than it is a major cause of subsequent developments in relation to abuse of the environment. The peculiar history of technology, which only in the nineteenth century drags science fully into its sphere of influence and partial control, is more critical to understanding and addressing the ecological crisis than are epistemology and what appears to be an overly idealistic-ideological reading of the subject-object dichotomy in thought processes. Here, one has also to consider Jacob Bronowski's long-argued hypothesis that "the hand is the cutting edge of the mind" — by which Bronowski, as an apologist for science and as a materialist philosopher, argues that the mind grows in response to what the hand accomplishes — a very tactile, body-centered approach to human mind-thought reality. Writing in 1978, Brian Stock, professor of Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto, took note of the dilemma posed by White in jux-

taping technology and science at an early stage of their development. But one must confess that, for the most part, White's work has been inadequately discussed among historians of science and intellectual historians. Certainly the current debate over the subject-object dichotomy, with Descartes at the center of the discussion, seems seriously to neglect the consciousness-altering role of technology as an important factor in the evolution of the subject-object dynamic. It seems evident that a popular pragmatism and concern for utility drew heavily upon a subject-object mode of perception, which, in this form, has also played a valuable, humanizing role in social change.

Here let me add a further complication to the discussion of the subject-object mode of thinking. In one of her more recent books, Professor McFague has paid singular tribute to the philosophical-theological work of Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965), a major figure in theological and political-philosophical discussions in Europe and America during the first half of this century. Professor McFague ascribes to Tillich a pivotal role in the alteration of the course of theological discussion during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶ Not many, perhaps, would agree with her assessment of Tillich's contribution, but of special interest in our context is his argument that the problem of the subject-object cleavage entered the philosophical tradition with the work of Augustine in the late fourth, early fifth century. Speaking out of the German Idealist tradition, Tillich, in his 1912 dissertation on the thought of Friedrich Schelling, argued that the subject-object dichotomy is introduced into the philosophical tradition as a result of the sense of guilt. The title of his work hints at this point: *Mystik und Schuldbewusstsein in Schellings philosophische Entwicklung* (Mysticism and Guilt-Consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development).¹⁷

Drawing heavily upon the thought of Immanuel Kant as well as Schelling, especially the latter's interpretation of the Western philosophical tradition, Tillich argued that this philosophical tradition, going back to the Greeks, has concerned itself with or played off two basic problems over its long extent: the problem of the one and the many and the problem of the subject-object cleavage. The former is represented by the term *mysticism* and is represented as the effort to resolve the experience of manifoldness into some sort of overarching or underlying unity or oneness. The latter, the subject-object cleavage, is the experience of separation and alienation, the sense of existing over-against the world and God, in Augustine's thought the result of guilt and sin. Tillich outlines the various philosophical solutions that

followed the framing of these problems and determined that most past "solutions" were inadequate, either as single-problem solutions or as solutions to the two problems combined. In contrast to Whitehead, who offered the opinion that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, Tillich, via Schelling, argued that all philosophy has essentially been an effort to overcome the dichotomies of the-one-and-the-many and the subject-object cleavage by means of a limited number of "principles of identity."

What I find interesting in Tillich's thought at this point is that guilt, the sense of human culpability and distance in the presence of God, is, for Tillich, the underlying point-of-origin of the subject-object cleavage, the sense of existential estrangement from the fullness of God, or, as Tillich preferred to say in later thought, the sense of standing out apart from "Being-Itself." Tillich's ponderings at this point suggest that it is more than feasible to regard the subject-object dichotomy as the basis for an appeal to conscience, and a call then to some form of reconciliation or reunion. His thought strikingly challenges the current fashion of viewing the subject-object cleavage as an inevitable source of domination and oppression as postulated by postmodernist and some feminist thought. In fact, Tillich regarded the subject-object mode of perception as the underlying condition and possibility of human creativity and challenge. Only as the individual is able to disengage from cultural wholes, from illusory totalities of meaning, can appeals be made to new, creative efforts at human healing. Tillich's argument suggests that there is, in fact, no criticism if there is no disengagement of the self. Rather than a curse, Tillich viewed the subject-object cleavage as a call to creative endeavor, as a call to transfer meaning from the realm of "Spirit" to that which was previously formless and lacking in meaningful structure, the vacuous facticity that exists over-against us. It was precisely within a subject-object polarity that Tillich saw the work of justice achieving its promise. The proposal I make here is that, at the very least, the subject-object dichotomy is variously rooted at points in time far distant from the seventeenth century and the modern Scientific Revolution. An objectification, a self-objectification in the form of conscience, can engender a self-criticism that is essential to any critique of human tendencies to dominate others. For an account of the origins of domination and oppression of the natural order, one has certainly to look more to technology than to the seventeenth century's varied efforts to deal epistemologically with the reality of the Copernican revolution.

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The second line of questioning in my response to Professor McFague is directed at her proposed corrective to subject-object thinking in the form of her “subject-subjects” model of perception and interaction, the latter a model proposed for the nonhuman world of nature as well as for the realm of the interpersonal. Here, if I understand her properly, she takes off on Martin Buber’s I-Thou concept. In his classic 1923 work, *I and Thou*,¹⁸ Buber espoused the reality and possibility of authentic mutuality between persons—but then he also extended the relationship of mutuality (rather tentatively in an appendix) to a tree and other nonhuman subjects. Professor McFague suggests that such inter-subjective acknowledgment and response should and can be extended to all life forms and the environment as a whole. While I agree with Professor McFague’s appeal to Buber’s I-Thou understanding at this point, there is also some possibility of distortion in her use of Buber’s thought to bolster ecological consciousness.

Buber, it should be pointed out, was a theist in very much the classical mode. Thus, he maintained the possibility of an initiating role for God in the interactions of the I-Thou relationship of which he spoke. He rejected mystical patterns of spiritual “absorption” or “assimilation” of either party in an I-Eternal Thou relationship, a viewpoint on mysticism in line with the thought of Søren Kierkegaard.¹⁹ What Buber offers us in *I and Thou* is a theologically grounded philosophy of “meeting” or “encounter” that presupposes the presence of a Divine Other, an “Eternal Thou.” Buber maintained that God, the Eternal Thou, is a nonmanipulable “other.” As such, this Other can be encountered but cannot be commanded, or manipulated, from the human side. This Other can inform, or shine through, the reality of I-Thou human encounters, encounters upon which Buber centered his thought as the reality most corresponding to the encounter with God. He argued that authentic human relationships exclude a manipulative purpose: they must express full mutuality—always without coercion of any sort. Both parties in such an encounter exercise full autonomy and assume the risk of self-disclosure. Neither party can seek or have domination. Each participant speaks from the depth of his/her selfhood without ulterior motives or purposes other than openness to encounter itself, the meeting of the Other. For Buber, such meetings with other human selves and with the Eternal Thou simply happen. They occur, but they can never be programmed to occur. They are

moments in time that transcend time; yet they leave behind the awareness and leaven of the possibility of other similar encounters. Such I-Thou meetings pass and the participants inevitably fall back into the I-It world of economics, institutions, and questions of survival.

Professor McFague is fully aware of this latter feature of Buber's thought. For example, she writes, "Buber shrewdly pointed out that we . . . can [not] live in an I-Thou relationship with all others all the time. . . . But [awareness of the I-Thou relationship] could mean a substantial change in Western attitudes toward others, especially the Third World poor and nature, a change summed up by respect, limitation, and sharing."²⁰ But what poses a problem for me in Professor McFague's use of Buber's thought in the present context of global warming is that the call for ecosystem balance and preservation is fundamentally a survival question. To me, this means primarily programs and policies, exhortations, and, at points, new restrictions on human freedom. It means discipline and ethical talk of ends and means, duties and obligations. In my mind, the thought of Immanuel Kant is a more realistic ethical resource for addressing the ecological crisis than Buber's faith-rooted exposition of the I-Thou relationship, one which provocatively presupposes an Eternal Thou beyond capture and beyond human use in solving yet another pressing human problem.

In short, though Professor McFague rather scorns a utilitarian mindset, she strikes me as profoundly utilitarian (in her meaning of the term) in her effort to frame a "deeper spirituality" as a means of addressing the "seriousness of global warming." On one hand she affirms a rather stark but realistic appraisal of the environmental problem: "[S]ince we created the problem, presumably, we can do something about it"²¹—an appraisal Kant certainly would have understood. Yet on the other hand, she proposes the project of altering individual and social consciousness to inspire the ethical commitment essential, it seems, to a solution. To be sure, Professor McFague offers the necessary disclaimer that her proposal of a subject-subjects model for human consciousness—not just for Christians or Westerners—represents an absolute of any sort. All models, she assures, are "partial and relative"; all models "are social constructions."²² Yet her own model, she also asserts, "is not . . . esoteric, rare, or limited to Christians. Its basis lies deep within all of us."²³

III. On Engineering Consciousness

These remarks bring me to a third and final line of questioning that relates to the entire project of consciousness engineering and alteration. Professor McFague comes to the problem of climate change with the perspective of a successful decades-long feminist struggle to raise consciousness about the repressed status of women in First World societies. Much positive gain has been accomplished in this realm, and much remains to be done. My question in this regard is whether or not human consciousness and awareness is as malleable as our author supposes. Advocates of the Enlightenment believe in progress and the infinite malleability of human nature; Professor McFague seems to share this outlook in her own proposed project to shape or fix human consciousness.

This modeling-of-consciousness (read: shaping-of-consciousness) idea represents an interesting concept, one Professor McFague has worked with in earlier books as she has attempted to provide alternative concepts for God. In reflecting upon this idea, I surmise that there are different sources for this sort of image-fashioning that underlies her usage. But the lead source, obviously, would seem to be the successful use of modeling in some fields of science, such as in the discovery of the double helix by Watson and Crick or Bohr's modeling of the structure of the atom in nuclear physics. Modeling in the science field, however, serves a significantly different function from what it does in Professor McFague's field. In the sciences, modeling does not in and of itself deny a correspondence theory of truth. It serves a *useful* function in helping the inquiring mind to "visualize" what is not accessible to sensory description, even when supplemented by technological instrumentation. It has pragmatic utility and, one might add, presupposes a subject-object relationship at a fundamental level. But Professor McFague's use of this idea, as already suggested, focuses upon the subjective consciousness itself. It is inner-directed, not outward-directed; it is self-address with the purpose of self-transformation. She argues that the changed consciousness that will ensue from the subject-subjects model will significantly benefit the environment while simultaneously contributing to a sense of human well-being that can be described as "abundant life."

While at some points Professor McFague writes in a reserved tone about the modest, helpful intent of her contribution toward the well-being of planet earth—and no contribution toward such an end can be

lightly discounted — at other points she implies a mind-altering revision of human self-awareness, a reconstitution of human consciousness that extends beyond religious communities and cultural locations, whether in the First or Third Worlds. What I find unclear about the modeling-of-a-new-consciousness project is whether the projection of the subject-subjects model is intended to build upon an implicit love of nature that only needs an adequate model to accomplish its further development, or whether the model itself will act upon our varied levels of consciousness and induce, of itself, the necessary, more positive relationship to the natural world. Perhaps she would say both.

Some, however, would argue that human consciousness is not quite as easily engineered as Professor McFague supposes. Her assumption of a very malleable human consciousness is suggestive of an optimistic Enlightenment mindset, one which saw the elimination of human ignorance and superstition as the chief means to a redemptive, future social order, with nature as a source of support and inspiration. The Enlightenment, however, suffered disenchantment in its “nature-as-support-of-human-goodness” supposition when it was forced to deal with the devastation of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. And earlier, it was Kepler’s discovery of the elliptical planetary orbits, Galileo’s telescopic observations, and Newton’s mathematical computations on gravity that established the Copernican sun-centered world and, correspondingly, shattered the comfortable belief in an earth-centered universe. Consciousness was altered also by the nova of 1572, which undid for Tycho Brahe and others in his generation the notion of the changeless perfection of the celestial spheres. Then, in more recent times, it was the March 1993 discovery by Eugene and Carolyn Shoemaker, along with astronomer David Levy, of a fragmented comet on a collision course with Jupiter, and its impact on the surface of that planet in July 1994, that alerted an earthly audience to the frequency of such heavenly catastrophes. This event is recasting people’s awareness of the vulnerability of the earth itself to such astronomical events and a recently computed one-in-a-thousand chance that a comet or asteroid will collide with earth once in an average human lifetime. All of this suggests that events outside of human control have in the past played a singular role in shaping human consciousness. By contrast, it is less clear that self-conscious efforts at design, or redesign, of human consciousness have been equally successful in effecting changes in a *Weltanschauung*.

This, however, is not to say that significant historical change has not been accomplished by appeal to deeply held shared values, especially the metahistorical value of equality, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Civil Rights movement, or the Feminist movement. But one must say that history is a deceptive partner in the matter of consciousness change. Much human struggle and sacrifice have previously gone into efforts to alter the course of history, but, perhaps more often than not, an intended historical purpose has yielded unexpected and inexplicable outcomes, as in the French and Russian Revolutions, the unanticipated destructiveness of World War I, the troubled heritage of the Vietnam War. The course of events can run counter to human intentionality and show deeply held beliefs to be illusory. Added to all of this is the strange history of technology, which, while it constantly enhances human power and sensory experience, can also subtly alter in unforeseen ways human consciousness and radically disrupt social and economic orders previously perceived to be adequate, and even sometimes equitable.

In the light of such evidence, it would seem apparent that human consciousness constitutes a very elusive subject — or object — of control. A modeling aimed at engineering consciousness — even with the aid of poetry and appeals to “socially constructed,” yet “transcendental,” values of equality and justice — hardly seems to address the issue at hand of environmental degradation in the form of climate change. This phenomenon seems likely to be addressed more effectively on the level of a survival appeal, rather than on an eclectic marshalling of aesthetic and personal relational motivations. The problem, however, is of such a nature that all sorts of battalions, filled with quite varied enlistees, should be welcomed to this fray — and Professor McFague has styled an appeal that can also enlist some for the common struggle. While this can be affirmed, it can nonetheless be suggested that subject-object thinking may, in fact, provide its own worthy and very effective battalions for the effort ahead.

IV. Final Statement

Let me conclude with a brief statement of my own perspective on the problem of climate change and the larger question of an environmental ethic, a perspective implicit in the criticism I have already offered. I also entertain a modest view of the theological contribution to this ethical debate. Professor McFague, in company with Lynn White Jr., is, it

appears, committed to the cause of the “re-enchantment” of nature as a necessary means of addressing the problem of the human abuse of the environment. I, however, am less convinced of the effectiveness of a “designer theology” to this end. By this I mean a theology designed to meet a specific sort of human problem and need, and which then takes on all-encompassing dimensions, Hegel-like “world-historical” dimensions. That kind of theology strikes me as too transparently “made in our own image,” and, in my mind, reflects a deeply rooted narcissism that has been well noted and commented upon in our time.²⁴

When it comes to the matter of climate change or of “killer asteroids,” I believe the ethical problem becomes basically a survival question. And a survival question such as this is simply a broad human question, one rooted in the fundamental instinct of self- and species-preservation. These sorts of questions can be also addressed theologically, but a theological read of the situation is by its very nature a *faith* read. By this I mean to say only that if the matter of God’s grace is at the center of Christian faith, then it seems to me simply evident that no Christian could want to bring a premature end to the earthly praise of God, a praise manifested also in determined efforts to work at a human healing and community. Whereas Professor McFague seems to want to work toward the discovery of an “abundant life,” I am concerned with working from the fragments of grace-in-community already present among us and working toward its continuation and further development.

I probably share with Professor McFague, though she has not articulated it explicitly, a concern that a myopic and obsessive otherworldliness can prove very destructive of *this* world and thus also of the praise of God in Christ. Otherworldliness of this sort, an otherworldliness with a primary focus on what is to come after this life, is, of course, not unique to Christianity. An answer to death is common to virtually all religious traditions, but where the “answer” to death obscures the responsibility for and to life, critical judgments and determinations need to be made. Regard for nature and the natural world is not lacking in the Christian tradition and is vital to it, despite the peculiar development of technology on the soil of Medieval Christian Europe. Certainly, the figure of St. Francis of Assisi is a reminder of an inclusive earthly compassion. But such compassion and understanding is also found among nonmystical theological types such as the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Bucer, who in 1523 deplored the human abuse of the creaturely realm. He wrote that humankind, in the

presence of “all creatures,” should so direct its “being” in all its actions that it “seeks not its own, but only the welfare of . . . neighbors,” sisters and brothers, “for the honor of God.” Bucer enjoined us to value *all* creatures, not alone in their usefulness to humankind, but to the end that they should be treated “for their own welfare and proper honor.”²⁵

Some conceptual formulae may have changed; the language in our time has inevitably undergone adjustment. But the substance of Christian spiritual address, in the Bucer case, is palpably in accord with a Christian ecological calling in our own day. On this matter of a Christian ecological calling, Professor McFague and I certainly share a common mind. We disagree strongly, however, about the efficacy of a salvific human healing achieved through a manipulation of human consciousness. We live in a real world, a God-given world — only in part in a “socially constructed” world.

Notes

1. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962).
2. Lynn White Jr., “What Accelerated Technological Progress in the Western Middle Ages?” in *Scientific Change*, ed. A. C. Crombie (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 272–91.
3. *Ibid.*, 287.
4. Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203–207. Reprinted in Lynn White Jr., *Machina Ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).
5. Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952).
6. White, *Machina Ex Deo*, 86.
7. Sallie McFague, “The Loving Eye vs. the Arrogant Eye: A Christian Critique of the Western Gaze on Nature and the Third World,” *Macalester International* 6 (Spring 1998): 80.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 87.
11. *Ibid.*, 79–80.
12. *Ibid.*, 81.
13. *Ibid.*, 82.
14. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 31.
15. White, “What Accelerated Technological Progress,” 284.
16. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 221.
17. Paul Tillich, *Frühe Hauptwerke/Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959), 13–108.

18. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).
19. Ibid. See pp. 83–95 for Buber's rejection of mystical union or absorption. Buber, in this discussion, reflects the very strong influence of Kierkegaard, especially his *Sickness unto Death*. McFague misunderstands Buber when she supposes that the particularity of the Other is lost in Buber's pervasive I-Eternal Thou "mysticism" of inwardness and what she terms its "verticality." See Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 100–103.
20. McFague, "The Loving Eye," 86.
21. Ibid., 79.
22. Ibid., 81.
23. Ibid., 90.
24. The reference is especially to the work of Christopher Lasch. See his *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978, c1979).
25. Martin Bucer, *Instruction in Christian Love (1523)*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1952), 27–29.