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23 . Wendell Berry

Two Economies

Some time ago, in conversation with Wes Jackson in which we were laboring to define the causes of the modern ruination of farmland, we finally got around to the money economy. I said that an economy based on energy would be more benign because it would be more comprehen-sive.

Wes would not agree. "An energy economy still wouldn't be comprehensive enough."

"Well," I said, "then what kind of economy *would* be comprehensive enough."

He hesitated a moment, and then, grinning, said, "The Kingdom of God."

I assume that Wes used the term because he found it, at that point in our conversation, indispensable; I assume so because, in my pondering over its occurrence at that point, I have found it indispensable myself. For the thing that troubles us about the industrial economy is exactly that it is not comprehensive enough, that, moreover, it tends to destroy what it does not comprehend, and that it is *dependent* upon much that it does not comprehend. In attempting to criticize such an economy, we naturally pose against it an economy that does not leave anything out, and we can say without presuming too much that the first principle of the Kingdom of God is that it includes everything; in it, the fall of every sparrow is a significant event. We are in it whether we know it or not and whether we wish to be or not. Another principle, both ecological and traditional, is that everything in the Kingdom of God is joined both to it and to everything else that is in it; that is to say, the Kingdom of God is orderly. A third principle is that humans do not and can never know either all the creatures that the Kingdom of God contains or the whole pattern or order by which it contains them.

The suitability of the Kingdom of God as, so to speak, a place name is partly owing to the fact that it still means pretty much what it has always meant. Because, I think, of the embarrassment that the phrase has increasingly caused among the educated, it has not been much tainted or tampered with by the disinterested processes of academic thought; it is a phrase that comes to us with its cultural strings still attached. To say that we live in the Kingdom of God is both to suggest the difficulty of our

condition and to imply a fairly complete set of culture-borne instructions for living in it. These instructions are not always explicitly ecological, but it can be argued that they are always implicitly so, for all of them rest ultimately on the assumptions that I have given as the second and third principles of the Kingdom of God that we live within order and that this order is both greater and more intricate than we can know. The difficulty of our predicament, then, is made clear if we add a fourth principle: though we cannot produce a complete or even an adequate description of this order, severe penalties are in store for us if we presume upon it or violate it.

I am not dealing, of course, with perceptions that are only Biblical. The ancient Greeks, according to Aubrey de Sélincourt, saw "a continuing moral pattern in the vicissitudes of human fortune," a pattern "formed from the belief that men, as men, are subject to certain limitations imposed by a Power—call it Fate or God—which they cannot fully comprehend, and that any attempt to transcend those limitations is met by inevitable punishment."[1] The Greek name for the pride that attempts to transcend human limitations was *hubris*, and hubris was the cause of what the Greeks understood as tragedy.

Nearly the same sense of necessary human limitation is implied in the Old Testament's repeated remonstrances against too great a human confidence in the power of "mine own hand." Gideon's army against the Midianites, for example, was reduced from thirty-two thousand to three hundred expressly to prevent the Israelites from saying, "Mine own hand hath saved me."[2] A similar purpose was served by the institution of the Sabbath, when by not working, the Israelites were meant to see the limited efficacy of their work and thus to understand their true dependence.

Though I hope that my insistence on the usefulness of the term, the Kingdom of God, will be understood, I must acknowledge that the term is local, in the sense that it is fully available only to those whose languages are involved in Western or Biblical tradition. A person of Eastern heritage, for example, might speak of the totality of all creation, visible and invisible, as "the Tao." I am well aware also that many people would not willingly use either term, or any such term. For these reasons, I do not want to make a statement that is specially or exclusively Biblical, and so I would like now to introduce a more culturally neutral term for that economy that I have been calling the Kingdom of God. Sometimes, in thinking about it, I have called it the Great Economy, which is the name I am going to make do with here—though I will remain under the personal necessity of Biblical reference. And that, I think, must be one of my points: we can name it whatever we wish, but we cannot define it except by way of a religious tradition. The Great Economy, like the Tao or the Kingdom of

God, is both known and unknown, visible and invisible, comprehensible and mysterious. It is, thus, the ultimate condition of our experience and of the practical questions rising from our experience, and it imposes on our consideration of those questions an extremity of seriousness and an extremity of humility.

I am assuming that the Great Economy, whatever we may name it, is indeed—and in ways that are, to some extent, practical—an economy: it includes principles and patterns by which values or powers or necessities are parceled out and exchanged. But if the Great Economy comprehends humans and thus cannot be fully comprehended by them, then it is also not an economy in which humans can participate directly. What this suggests, in fact, is that humans can live in the Great Economy only with great uneasiness, subject to powers and laws that they can understand only in part. There is no human accounting for the Great Economy. This obviously is a description of the circumstance of religion, the circumstance that *causes* religion. De Sélincourt states the problem succinctly: "Religion in every age is concerned with the vast and fluctuant regions of experience which knowledge cannot penetrate, the regions which a man knows, or feels, to stretch away beyond the narrow, closed circle of what he can manage by the use of his wits."[3]

If there is no denying our dependence on the Great Economy, there is also no denying our need for a little economy—a narrow circle within which things are manageable by the use of our wits. I don't think Wes Jackson was denying this need when he invoked the Kingdom of God as the complete economy; rather, he was, I think, insisting upon a priority that is both proper and practical. If he had a text in mind, it must have been the sixth chapter of Matthew, in which, after speaking of God's care for nature, the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field, Jesus says: "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? . . . but seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."[4]

There is an attitude that sees in this text a denial of the value of any economy of this world, but this attitude makes the text useless and meaningless to humans who must live in this world. These verses make usable sense only if we read them as a statement of considerable practical import about the real nature of worldly economy. If this passage meant for us to seek *only* the Kingdom of God, it would have the odd result of making good people not only feckless but also dependent upon bad people busy with quite other seekings. It says, rather, to seek the Kingdom of God *first*; that is, it gives an obviously necessary priority to the Great Economy over any little economy made within it. The passage also clearly includes

nature within the Great Economy, and it affirms the goodness, indeed the sanctity, of natural creatures.

The fowls of the air and the lilies of the field live within the Great Economy entirely by nature, whereas humans, though entirely dependent upon it, must live in it partly by artifice. The birds can live in the Great Economy only as birds, the flowers only as flowers, the humans only as humans. The humans, unlike the wild creatures, may choose not to live in it—or, rather, since no creature can escape it, they may choose to act as if they do not, or they may choose to try to live in it on their own terms. If humans choose to live in the Great Economy on its terms, then they must live in harmony with it, maintaining it in trust and learning to consider the lives of the wild creatures.

Certain economic restrictions are clearly implied, and these restrictions have mainly to do with the economics of futurity. We know from other passages in the Gospels that a certain preparedness or provisioning for the future is required of us. It may be that such preparedness is part of our obligation to today, and for *that* reason we need "take no thought for the morrow."[5] But it is clear that such preparations can be carried too far, that we can provide too much for the future. The sin of "a certain rich man" in the twelfth chapter of Luke is that he has "much goods laid up for many years" and thus believes that he can "eat, drink, and be merry."[6] The offense seems to be that he has stored up too much and in the process has belittled the future, for he had reduced it to the size of his own hopes and expectations. He is prepared for a future in which he will be prosperous, not for one in which he will be dead. We know from our own experience that it is possible to live in the present in such a way as to diminish the future practically as well as spiritually. By laying up "much goods" in the present—and, in the process, *using up* such goods as topsoil, fossil fuel, and fossil water—we incur a debt to the future that we cannot repay. That is, we diminish the future by deeds that we call "use" but that the future will call "theft." We may say, then, that we seek the Kingdom of God, in part, by our economic behavior, and we fail to find it if that behavior is wrong.

If we read Matthew 6:24-34 as a teaching that is *both* practical and spiritual, as I think we must, then we must see it as prescribing the terms of a kind of little economy or human economy. Since I am deriving it here from a Christian text, we could call it a Christian economy. But we need not call it that. A Buddhist might look at the working principles of the economy I am talking about and call it a Buddhist economy. E.F. Schumacher, in fact, says that the aim of "Buddhist economics" is "to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption,"[7] which I think is partly the sense of Matthew 6:24-34. Or we could call

this economy (from Matthew 6:28) a "considerate" economy or, simply, a good economy. Whatever the name, the human economy, if it is to be a good economy, must fit harmoniously within and must correspond to the Great Economy; in certain important ways, it must be an analogue of the Great Economy.

A fifth principle of the Great Economy that must now be added to the previous four is that we cannot foresee an end to it: The same basic stuff is going to be shifting from one form to another, so far as we know, forever. From a human point of view, this is a rather heartless endurance. As cynics sometimes point out, conservation is always working, for what is lost or wasted in one place always turns up someplace else. Thus, soil erosion in Iowa involves no loss because the soil is conserved in the Gulf of Mexico. Such people like to point out that soil erosion is as "natural" as birdsong. And so it is, though these people neglect to observe that soil conservation is also natural, and that, before the advent of farming, nature alone worked effectively to keep Iowa topsoil in Iowa. But to say that soil erosion is natural is only a way of saying that there are some things that the Great Economy cannot do for humans. Only a little economy, only a good human economy, can define for us the value of keeping the topsoil where it is.

A good human economy, that is, defines and values human goods, and, like the Great Economy, it conserves and protects its goods. It proposes to endure. Like the Great Economy, a good human economy does not propose for itself a term to be set by humans. That termlessness, with all its implied human limits and restraints, is a human good.

The difference between the Great Economy and any human economy is pretty much the difference between the goose that laid the golden egg and the golden egg. For the goose to have value as a layer of golden eggs, she must be a live goose and therefore joined to the life cycle, which means that she is joined to all manner of things, patterns, and processes that sooner or later surpass human comprehension. The golden egg, on the other hand, can be fully valued by humans according to kind, weight, and measure—but it will not hatch, and it cannot be eaten. To make the value of the egg *fully* accountable, then, we must make it "golden," must remove it from life. But if in our valuation of it, we wish to consider its relation to the goose, we have to undertake a different kind of accounting, more exacting if less exact. That is, if we wish to value the egg in such a way as to preserve the goose that laid it, we find that we must behave, not scientifically, but humanely; we must understand ourselves as humans as fully as our traditional knowledge of ourselves permit. We participate in our little human economy to a considerable extent, that is, by factual knowledge, calculation, and manipulation; our participation in the Great

Economy also requires those things, but requires as well humility, sympathy, forbearance, generosity, imagination.

Another critical difference, implicit in the foregoing, is that, though a human economy can evaluate, distribute, use, and preserve things of value, it cannot make value. Value can originate only in the Great Economy. It is true enough that humans can add value to natural things: We may transform trees into boards, and transform boards into chairs, adding value at each transformation. In a good human economy, these transformations would be made by good work, which would be properly valued and the workers properly rewarded. But a good human economy would recognize at the same time that it was dealing all along with materials and powers that it did not make. It did not make trees, and it did not make the intelligence and talents of the human workers. What the humans have added at every step is artificial, made by art, and though the value of art is critical to human life, it is a secondary value.

When humans presume to originate value, they make value that is first abstract and then false, tyrannical, and destructive of real value. Money value, for instance, can be said to be true only when it justly and stably represents the value of necessary goods, such as clothing, food, and shelter, which originate ultimately in the Great Economy. Humans can originate money value in the abstract, but only by inflation and usury, which falsify the value of necessary things and damage their natural and human resources. Inflation and usury and the damages that follow can be understood, perhaps, as retributions for the presumption that humans can make value.

We may say, then, that a human economy originates, manages, and distributes secondary or added value but that, if it is to last long, it must also manage in such a way as to make continuously available those values that are primary or given, the secondary values having mainly to do with husbandry and trusteeship. A little economy is obliged to receive them gratefully and to use them in such a way as not to diminish them. We might make a long list of things that we would have to describe as primary values, which come directly into the little economy from the Great, but the one I want to talk about, because it is the one with which we have the most intimate working relationship, is the topsoil.

We cannot speak of topsoil, indeed we cannot know what it is, without acknowledging at the outset that we cannot make it. We can care for it (or not), we can even, as we say, "build" it, but we can do so only by assenting to, preserving, and perhaps collaborating in its own processes. To those processes themselves we have nothing to contribute. We cannot make topsoil, and we cannot make any substitute for it; we cannot do what it does.

It is apparently impossible to make an adequate description of topsoil in the sort of language that we have come to call "scientific." For, although any soil sample can be reduced to its inert quantities, a handful of the real thing has life in it; it is full of living creatures. And if we try to describe the behavior of that life we will see that it is doing something that, if we are not careful, we will call "unearthly": It is making life out of death. Not so very long ago, had we known about it what we know now, we would probably have called it "miraculous." In a time when death is looked upon with almost universal enmity, it is hard to believe that the land we live on and the lives we live are the gifts of death. Yet that is so and it is the topsoil that makes it so. In fact, in talking about topsoil, it is hard to avoid the language of religion. When, in "This Compost," Whitman says, "The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves," he is speaking in the Christian tradition, and yet he is describing what happens, with language that is entirely accurate and appropriate. And when at last he says of the earth that "It gives such divine materials to men," we feel that the propriety of the words comes not from convention but from the actuality of the uncanny transformation that his poem has required us to imagine, as if in obedience to the summons to "consider the lilies of the field."

Even in its functions that may seem, to mechanists, to be mechanical, the topsoil behaves complexly and wonderfully. A healthy topsoil, for instance, has at once the ability to hold water and to drain well. When we speak of the health of a watershed, these abilities are what we are talking about, and the word "health," which we do use in speaking of watersheds, warns us that we are not speaking merely of mechanics. A healthy soil is made by the life dying into it and by the life living in it, and to its double ability to drain and retain water we are complexly indebted, for it not only gives us good crops but also erosion control as well as both flood control and a constant water supply.

Obviously, topsoil, not energy or money, is the critical quantity in agriculture. And topsoil is a quantity; we need it in quantities. We now need more of it than we have; we need to help it to make more of itself. But it is a most peculiar quantity, for it is inseparable from quality. Topsoil is by definition *good* soil, and it can be preserved in human use only by good care. When humans see it as a mere quantity, they tend to make it that; they destroy the life in it, and they begin to measure in inches and feet and tons how much of it they have "lost."

When we see the topsoil as the foundation of that household of living creatures and their nonliving supports that we now call an "ecosystem" but which some of us understand better as a "neighborhood," we find ourselves in debt for other benefits that baffle our mechanical logic and

defy our measures. For example, one of the principles of an ecosystem is that diversity increases capacity—or, to put it another way, that complications of form or pattern can increase greatly within quantitative limits. I suppose that this may be true only up to a point, but I suppose also that that point is far beyond the human capacity to understand or diagram the pattern.

On a farm put together on a sound ecological pattern, the same principle holds. Henry Besuden, the great farmer and shepherd of Clark Country, Kentucky, compares the small sheep flock to the two spoons of sugar that can be added to a brimful cup of coffee, which then becomes "more palatable [but] doesn't run over. You can stock your farm to the limit with other livestock and still add a small flock of sheep." He says this, characteristically, after rejecting the efforts of sheep specialists to get beyond "the natural physical limits of the ewe" by breeding out of season in order to get three lamb crops in two years or by striving for "litters" of lambs rather than nature's optimum of twins. Rather than chafe at "natural physical limits," he would turn to nature's elegant way of enriching herself *within* her physical limits by diversification, by complication of pattern. Rather than strain the productive capacity of the farm—a healthier, safer, and cheaper procedure. Like many of the better traditional farmers, Henry Besuden is suspicious of "the measure of land in length and width," for he would be mindful as well of "the depth and quality."[8]

A small flock of ewes, fitted properly into a farm's pattern, virtually disappears into the farm and does it good, just as it virtually disappears into the time and energy economy of a farm family and does it good. And, properly fitted into the farm's pattern, the small flock virtually disappears from the debit side of the farm's accounts but shows up plainly on the credit side. This "disappearance" is possible, not to the extent that the farm is a human artifact, a belonging of the human economy, but to the extent that it remains, by its obedience to natural principle, a belonging of the Great Economy.

A little economy may be said to be good insofar as it perceives the excellence of these benefits and husbands and preserves them. It is by holding up this standard of goodness that we can best see what is wrong with the industrial economy. For the industrial economy does not see itself as a little economy; it sees itself as the *only* economy. It makes itself thus exclusive by the simple expedient of valuing only what it can use—that is, only what it can regard as "raw material" to be transformed mechanically into something else. What it cannot use, it characteristically describes as "useless," "worthless," "random," or "wild," and gives it some such name as "chaos," "disorder," or "waste"—and thus ruins it or cheapens it in preparation for eventual use. That western deserts or eastern mountains were

once perceived as "useless" made it easy to dignify them by the "use" of strip mining. Once we acknowledge the existence of the Great Economy, however, we are astonished and frightened to see how much modern enterprise is the work of hubris, occurring outside the human boundary established by ancient tradition. The industrial economy is based on invasion and pillage of the Great Economy.

The weakness of the industrial economy is clearly revealed when it imposes its terms upon agriculture, for its terms cannot define those natural principles that are most vital to the life and longevity of farms. Even if the industrial economists could afford to do so, they could not describe the dependence of agriculture upon nature. If asked to consider the lilies of the field or told that the wheat is resurrected out of its graves, the agricultural industrialist would reply that "my engineer's mind inclines less toward the poetic and philosophical, and more toward the practical and possible,"[9] unable even to suspect that such a division of mind induces blindness to possibilities of the utmost practical concern.

That good topsoil both drains and retains water, that diversity increases capacity, are facts similarly alien to industrial logic. Industrialists see retention and drainage as different and opposite functions, and they would promote one at the expense of the other, just as, diversity being inimical to industrial procedure, they would commit themselves to the forlorn expedient of enlarging capacity by increasing area. They are thus encumbered by dependence on mechanical solutions that can work only by isolating and oversimplifying problems. Industrialists are condemned to proceed by devices. To facilitate water retention, they must resort to a specialized water-holding device such as a terrace or a dam; to facilitate drainage, they must use drain tile, or a ditch, or a "subsoiler." It is possible, I know, to argue that this analysis is too general and to produce exceptions, but I do not think it deniable that the discipline of soil conservation is now principally that of the engineer, not that of the farmer or soil husband—that it is now a matter of digging in the earth, not of enriching it.

I do not mean to say that the devices of engineering are always inappropriate; they have their place, not least in the restoration of land abused by the devices of engineering. My point is that, to facilitate both water retention and drainage in the same place, we must improve the soil, which is not a mechanical device but, among other things, a graveyard, a place of resurrection, and a community of living creatures. Devices may sometimes help, but only up to a point, for soil is improved by what humans do not do as well as by what they do. The proprieties of soil husbandry require acts that are much more complex than industrial acts, for these acts are conditioned by the ability *not* to act, by forbearance or self-restraint, sympathy or generosity. The industrial act is simply prescribed

by thought, but the act of soil building is also *limited* by thought. We build soil by knowing what to do but also by knowing what not to do and by knowing when to stop. Both kinds of knowledge are necessary because invariably, at some point, the reach of human comprehension becomes too short, and at that point the work of the human economy must end in absolute deference to the working of the Great Economy. This, I take it, is the practical significance of the idea of the Sabbath.

To push our work beyond that point, invading the Great Economy, is to become guilty of hubris, of presuming to be greater than we are. We cannot do what the topsoil does, any more than we can do what God does or what a swallow does. We can fly, but only as humans—very crudely, noisily, and clumsily. We can dispose of corpses and garbage, but we cannot, by our devices, turn them into fertility and new life. And we are discovering, to our great uneasiness, that we cannot dispose at all of some of our so-called wastes that are toxic or radioactive. We can appropriate and in some fashion use godly powers, but we cannot use them safely, and we cannot control the results. That is to say that the human condition remains for us what it was for Homer and the authors of the Bible. Now that we have brought such enormous powers to our aid (we hope), it seems more necessary than ever to observe how inexorably the human condition still contains us. We only do what humans can do, and our machines, however they may appear to enlarge our possibilities, are invariably infected with our limitations. Sometimes, in enlarging our possibilities, they narrow our limits and leave us more powerful but less content, less safe, and less free. The mechanical means by which we propose to escape the human condition only extend it; thinking to transcend our definition as fallen creatures, we have only colonized more and more territory eastward of Eden.

Like the rich man of the parable, the industrialist thinks to escape the persistent obligations of the human condition by means of "much goods laid up for many years"—by means, in other words, of quantities: resources, supplies, stockpiles, funds, reserves. But this is a grossly oversimplifying dream and, thus, a dangerous one. All the great natural goods that empower agriculture, some of which I have discussed, have to do with quantities, but they have to do also with qualities, and they involve principles that are not static but active; they have to do with formal processes. The topsoil exists as such because it is ceaselessly transforming death into life, ceaselessly supplying food and water to all that lives in it and from it; otherwise, "all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust."[10] If we are to live well on and from our land, we must live by faith in the ceaselessness of these processes and by faith in our own willingness

and ability to collaborate with them. Christ's prayer for "daily bread" is an affirmation of such faith, just as it is a repudiation of faith in "much goods laid up." Our life and livelihood are the gift of the topsoil and of our willingness and ability to care for it, to grow good wheat, to make good bread; they do not derive from stockpiles of raw materials or accumulations of purchasing power.

The industrial economy can define potentiality, even the potentiality of the living topsoil, only as a *fund*, and thus it must accept impoverishment as the inescapable condition of abundance. The invariable mode of its relation both to nature and to human culture is that of mining: withdrawal from a limited fund until that fund is exhausted. It removes natural fertility and human workmanship from bread. Thus the land is reduced to abstract marketable quantities of length and width, and bread to merchandise that is high in money value but low in food value. "Our bread," Guy Davenport once said to me, "is more obscene than our movies."

But the industrial use of *any* "resource" implies its exhaustion. It is for this reason that the industrial economy has been accompanied by an ever-increasing hurry of research and exploration, the motive of which is not "free enterprise" or "the spirit of free inquiry," as industrial scientists and apologists would have us believe, but the desperation that naturally and logically accompanies gluttony.

One of the favorite words of the industrial economy is "control": we want "to keep things under control"; we wish (or so we say) to "control" inflation and erosion; we have a discipline known as "crowd control"; we believe in "controlled growth" and "controlled development," in "traffic control" and "self-control." But, because we are always setting out to control something that we refuse to limit, we have made control a permanent and a helpless enterprise. If we will not limit causes, there can be no controlling of effects. What is to be the fate of self-control in an economy that encourages and rewards unlimited selfishness?

More than anything else, we would like to "control the forces of nature," refusing at the same time to impose any limit on human nature. We assume that such control and such freedom are our "rights," which seems to ensure that our means of control (of nature and of all else that we see as alien) will be violent. It is startling to recognize the extent to which the industrial economy depends upon controlled explosions—in mines, in weapons, in the cylinders of engines, in the economic pattern known as "boom and bust." This dependence is the result of a progress that can be argued for, but those who argue for it must recognize that, in all these means, good ends are served by a destructive principle, an association that is difficult to control if it is not limited; moreover, they must recognize that our failure to limit this association has raised the specter of

uncontrollable explosion. Nuclear holocaust, if it comes, will be the final detonation of an explosive economy.

An explosive economy, then, is not only an economy that is dependent upon explosions but also one that sets no limits on itself. Any little economy that sees itself as unlimited is obviously self-blinded. It does not see its real relation of dependence and obligation to the Great Economy. Instead, it calls the Great Economy "raw material" or "natural resources" or "nature" and proceeds with the business of putting it "under control."

But "control" is a word more than ordinarily revealing here, for its root meaning is to roll against, in the sense of a little wheel turning in opposition. The principle of control, then, involves necessarily the principle of division: one thing may turn against another thing only by being divided from it. This mechanical division and turning in opposition William Blake understood as evil, and he spoke of "Satanic wheels" and "Satanic mills": "wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic/Moving by compulsion each other."[11] By "wheel without wheel," Blake meant wheel outside of wheel, one wheel communicating motion to the other in the manner of two cogwheels, the point being that one wheel can turn another wheel outside itself only in a direction opposite to its own. This, I suppose, is acceptable enough as a mechanism. It becomes "Satanic" when it becomes a ruling metaphor and is used to describe and to organize fundamental relationships. Against the Satanic "wheel without wheel," Blake set the wheels of Eden, which "Wheel within wheel in freedom revolve, in harmony and peace."[12] This is the "wheel in the middle of a wheel"[13] of Ezekiel's vision, and it is an image of harmony. That the relation of these wheels is not mechanical we know from Ezekiel 1:21: "the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels." The wheels of opposition oppose the spirit of the living creature.

What had happened, as Blake saw accurately and feared justifiably, was a fundamental shift in the relation of humankind to the rest of creation. Sometime between, say Pope's verses on the Chain of Being in *An Essay on Man* and Blake's "London," the dominant minds had begun to see the human race, not as a part or a member of Creation, but as outside it and opposed to it. The industrial revolution was only a part of this change, but it is true that, when the wheels of the industrial revolution began to revolve, they turned against nature, which became the name for all of Creation thought to be below humanity, as well as, incidentally, against all once thought to be above humanity. Perhaps this would have been safe enough if nature—that is, if all the rest of Creation—had been, as proposed, passively subject to human purpose.

Of course, it never has been. As Blake foresaw, and as we now know, what we turn against must turn against us. Blake's image of the cogwheels

turning in relentless opposition is terrifyingly apt, for in our vaunted war against nature, nature fights back. The earth may answer our pinches and pokes "only with spring,"[14] as e.e. cummings said, but if we pinch and poke too much, she can answer also with flood or drouth, with catastrophic soil erosion, with plague and famine. Many of the occurrences that we call "acts of God" or "accidents of nature" are simply forthright natural responses to human provocations. Not always; I do not mean to imply here that, by living in harmony with nature, we can be free of floods and storms and drouths and earthquakes and volcanic eruptions; I am only pointing out, as many others have done, that, by living in opposition to nature, we can *cause* natural calamities of which we would otherwise be free.

The problem seems to be that a human economy cannot prescribe the terms of its own success. In a time when we wish to believe that humans are sole authors of the truth, that truth is relative, and that value judgments are all subjective, it is hard to say that a human economy can be wrong, and yet we have good, sound, practical reasons for saying so. It is indeed possible for a human economy to be wrong—not relatively wrong, in the sense of being "out of adjustment," or unfair according to some human definition of fairness, or weak according to the definition of its own purposes—but wrong absolutely and according to practical measures. Of course, if we see the human economy as the *only* economy, we will see its errors as political failures, and we will continue to talk about "recover." It is only when we think of the little human economy in relation to the Great Economy that we begin to understand our errors for what they are and to see the qualitative meanings of our quantitative measures. If we see the industrial economy in terms of the Great Economy, then we begin to see industrial wastes and losses not as "trade-offs" or "necessary risks" but as costs that, like all costs, are chargeable to somebody, sometime.

That we can prescribe the terms of our own success, that we can live outside or in ignorance of the Great Economy are the greatest errors. They condemn us to a life without a standard, wavering in inescapable bewilderment from paltry self-satisfaction to paltry self-dissatisfaction. But since we have no place to live but in the Great Economy, whether or not we know that and act accordingly is the critical question, not about economy merely, but about human life itself.

It is possible to make a little economy, such as our present one, that is so short-sighted and in which accounting is of so short a term as to give the impression that vices are necessary and practically justifiable. When we make our economy a little wheel turning in opposition to what we call "nature," then we set up competitiveness as the ruling principle in our

explanation of reality and in our understanding of economy; we make of it, willy-nilly, a virtue. But competitiveness, as a ruling principle and a virtue, imposes a logic that is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to control. That logic explains why our cars and our clothes are shoddily made, why our "wastes" are toxic, and why our "defensive" weapons are suicidal; it explains why it is so difficult for us to draw a line between "free enterprise" and crime. If our economic ideal is maximum profit with minimum responsibility, why should we be surprised to find our corporations so frequently in court and robbery on the increase? Why should we be surprised to find that medicine has become an exploitive industry, profitable in direct proportion to its hurry and its mechanical indifference? People who pay for shoddy products or careless services and people who are robbed outright are equally victims of theft, the only difference being that the robbers outright are not guilty of fraud.

If, on the other hand, we see ourselves as living within the Great Economy, under the necessity of making our little human economy within it, according to its terms, the smaller wheel turning in sympathy with the greater, receiving its being and its motion from it, then we see that the traditional virtues are necessary and are practically justifiable. Then, because in the Great Economy *all* transactions count and the account is never "closed," the ideal changes. We see that we cannot afford maximum profit or power with minimum responsibility because, in the Great Economy, the loser's losses finally afflict the winner. Now the ideal must be "the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption," which both defines and requires neighborly love. Competitiveness cannot be the ruling principle, for the Great Economy is not a "side" that we can join nor are there such "sides" within it. Thus, it is not the "sum of its parts" but a *membership* of parts inextricably joined to each other, indebted to each other, receiving significance and worth from each other and from the whole. One is obliged to "consider the lilies of the field," not because they are lilies or because they are exemplary, but because they are fellow members and because as fellow members, we and the lilies are in certain critical ways alike.

To say that within the Great Economy the virtues are necessary and practically justifiable is at once to remove them from that specialized, sanctimonious, condescending practice of virtuousness that is humorless, pointless, and intolerable to its beneficiaries. For a human, the good choice in the Great Economy is to see its membership as a neighborhood and oneself as a neighbor within it. I am sure that virtues count in a neighborhood—to "love thy neighbor as thyself" requires the help of all seven of them—but I am equally sure that in a neighborhood the virtues cannot be practiced as such. Temperance has no appearance or action of its own,

nor does justice, prudence, fortitude, faith, hope, or charity. They can only be employed on occasions. "He who would do good to another," William Blake said, "must do it in Minute Particulars."[15] To help each other, that is, we must go beyond the coldhearted charity of the "general good" and get down to work where we are: "Labor well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones,/And those who are in misery cannot remain so long/If we do but our duty: labor well the teeming Earth."[16] It is the Great Economy, not any little economy, that invests minute particulars with high and final importance. In the Great Economy, each part stands for the whole and is joined to it; the whole is present in the part and is its health. The industrial economy, by contrast, is always striving and failing to make fragments (pieces that it has broken) *add up* to an ever-fugitive wholeness.

Work that is authentically placed and understood within the Great Economy moves virtue towards virtuosity—that is, toward skill or technical competence. There is no use in helping our neighbors with their work if we do not know how to work. When the virtues are rightly practiced within the Great Economy, we do not call them virtues; we call them good farming, good forestry, good carpentry, good husbandry, good weaving and sewing, good homemaking, good parenthood, good neighborhood, and so on. The general principles are submerged in the particularities of their engagement with the world. Lao Tzu saw the appearance of the virtues as such, in the abstract, as indicative of their loss:

> When people lost sight of the way to live
> Came codes of love and honesty. . . .
> When differences weakened family ties
> Came benevolent fathers and dutiful sons;
> And when lands were disrupted and misgoverned
> Came ministers commended as loyal.[17]

And these lines might be read as an elaboration of the warning against the *appearances* of goodness at the beginning of the sixth chapter of Matthew.

The work of the small economy, when it is understandingly placed within the Great Economy, minutely particularizes the virtues and carries principle into practice; to the extent that it does so, it escapes specialization. The industrial economy requires the extreme specialization of work—the separation of work from its results—because it subsists upon divisions of interest and must deny the fundamental kinships of producer and consumer; seller and buyer; owner and worker; worker, work, and product; parent material and product; nature and artifice; thoughts, words, and deeds. Divided from those kinships, specialized artists and scientists identify themselves as "observers" or "objective observers"—that is,

as outsiders without responsibility or involvement. But the industrialized arts and sciences are false, their division is a lie, for there is no specialization of results.

There is no "outside" to the Great Economy, no escape into either specialization or generality, no "time off." Even insignificance is no escape, for in the membership of the Great Economy everything signifies; whatever we do counts. If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys. We can *presume* that we are outside the membership that includes us, but that presumption only damages the membership—and ourselves, of course, along with it.

In the industrial economy, the arts and the sciences are specialized "professions," each having its own language, speaking to none of the others. But the Great Economy proposes arts and sciences of memberships: ways of doing and ways of knowing that cannot be divided from each other or within themselves and that speak the common language of the communities where they are practiced.

Two Economies by Wendell Berry

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