

Is It OK To Alter Nature?

“I am sitting in front of my shiny laptop listening to digitally created music and a steady stream of coal trucks roaring past my apartment. I adjust my glasses to correct my otherwise blurry vision and think about the WVU Philosophy Department’s difficult question: “Is it OK to alter nature?”

Before attempting to answer this question, the words OK and nature must be clarified.

What does OK commonly mean? Does OK mean bad? I don’t think so. Imagine that an unnamed WVU freshman sleds down the hill behind Woodburn Hall on a lunch tray and careens into a park bench. The sledder is lying on her back holding her arm. A friend runs up and asks, “Does it hurt badly?” She responds, “No, I am OK.” In this case OK does not mean bad. But, does OK mean good? Once again imagine, or remember, that I wanted to kayak the Gauley River at full flood stage, but a park ranger tried to stop me. After great argument, I finally convinced her let me on the water. She said, “OK, you may paddle the flooded river, but I don’t recommend it.” Clearly in this case OK does not mean good. OK neither means good nor bad, right nor wrong. OK is a gray area between good and bad. To be OK is simply to be satisfactory or acceptable.

What does nature mean? I just ate a bowl of cereal that was supposedly 100% natural. But this cereal, which I poured from a plastic bag inside a cardboard box, does not seem to be a part of nature. Usually, nature seems to refer to something detached and other than human. A tree is a part of nature. A dog is a part of nature. My laptop is not a part of nature. Anything which is not a direct product of the human intellect seems to be a part of nature. This definition might need to be revisited after we discover extraterrestrials, but for now it should suffice. A human child seems to be a part of nature and a product of humans, but most of the time, humans result from the instinctive sex drive. Drawing a line between humans and nature or products of the human intellect and products of instinct might seem arbitrary, but this seems to be the reality of the common definition of nature. I would argue that many of our present environmental crisis result from this arbitrary separation between humans and nature, but that is a whole different essay. The idea that nature is separate from human’s intellect reflects common usage.

So, I am trying to answer the question: is it acceptable to alter things which the human intellect did not create?

I think that changing natural resources into this laptop that I am typing on is a good thing. I would argue that the global climate altering CO2 released from the coal fired power plant providing much needed electricity is a very bad thing. I believe that my eyeglasses are good for they improve my naturally blurry vision. I think that it is wrong for mountaintop removal coal mining to destroy Appalachian communities, culture and the mountains themselves to fuel our county’s addiction to dirty energy. I think it is acceptable to chisel a rock into a sculpture. I think it is OK to carve a dead tree into a canoe. It seems OK to log a single forest. It is satisfactory to mine the earth for needed resources. Changing nature can be both good and bad. There does not seem to be anything inherently wrong with altering nature, nor does there seem to be anything inherently good.

Whether an act is right or wrong seems to depend on much more than whether or not nature was altered. The far reaching consequences of an act on the environment and humans, which are inseparable from the environment, must be considered before concluding whether or not that action was right or wrong. It is dangerous to believe that humans can always improve nature, but it is fallacious to think that all alterations are bad. It is simply OK to alter nature.

“To answer this question, we must first agree what it is to “alter nature.” I will define it as intervening with the processes that would occur were it not for the existence of human life. Why is it that we would not say that a beaver is altering nature when it builds a dam, but we would say that a building company is altering nature when it tears down a forest to build a shopping mall? What makes humans different from other animals? Humans have the capacity to make informed decisions based on complicated reasoning; humans are moral beings. They can see how their actions may affect nature; therefore, many believe that humans have an obligation to not act a certain way if they think that their actions could be destructive towards others or their environment.

I do not believe that humans should never alter nature. If we held ourselves to such standards, the human species would no longer exist. We could not pick fruit because that would be altering nature. In fact, I think that many times humans have moral obligations to alter nature. Because we have the ability to predict how our actions might affect others or the environment, we have a responsibility to ourselves, other species, and the Earth. If we know that planting more trees could help with global warming, we have an obligation to do so if there are no other competing needs. Similarly, I believe that if someone is in great pain and we know that giving them morphine will alleviate their pain, we have a moral obligation to help the person.”

“My short answer is sometimes. The rub (problem) comes from deciding when. As a historic preservationist who lives in a house that occupies a space where once Native Americans and bison ranged, I must plead guilty to having abetted the altering of nature by providing a market for the practice. Sometimes we alter nature recklessly, and sometimes we alter nature to survive. If man has dominion (legal power) over nature, I believe we must come to know that just because we can alter nature does not always mean that we should. I do not mean to argue against progress, growth, or expansion; I believe that we must incorporate nature and history into that growth.

Mostly, we alter nature on a whim. We recognize new needs, housing for instance, and race for the bulldozer and the closest open field. While the need for housing is certainly just, the need to alter nature to accommodate it does not necessarily follow. Adaptively reusing resources that already exist is a more conscientious stewardship of nature that keeps in mind the needs of the yet unborn. Historic preservation speaks to that ideal. As I reflect on the advance of humankind at the expense of the natural world it seems to me that we are dangerously out of touch with a very basic truth — there’s barely enough nature to go around. If we want to survive and retain our humanity, we need to embrace nature as the giver of all life and work toward ensuring that it will ever be able to do so. Altering nature is frequently an act of violence. We really should look for alternatives when we can. It’s in our own best interests because nature, in all of its forms, will have the last laugh.”
