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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Erazim Kohák's Justification and Reclamation of Humanity: A Reflection of Man's Direct Duty to Nature

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Erazim Kohák's stance in his work A Human's Place in Nature in The Embers and the Stars, focusing on the justification and reclamation of humanity in the natural world. This inquiry begins by discussing and synthesizing ideas from various philosophers who raise the concern for humans to acknowledge and embody their ability to look back and forward. Such provides a context for Kohák's idea of the three orders— the order of being, the order of time, and the order of eternity. Then, the paper explores and confronts the problem regarding the duty of humans toward nature. This issue peaked during the history of modern philosophy and persists until contemporary times. This paper employs textual analysis, looks closely at Kohák's ideas, and argues that his way of bringing humanity back into the natural world shows that we have a direct responsibility to care for nature. The insights from this study add to the ongoing conversation about the moral relationship between people and the environment.

Keywords: Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Direct Duty, Man, Nature

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The Call for Man to Look Back and Forward

Within the history of philosophy, human existence is usually seen as a quest. Several philosophers in each period of this lifetime have reflected on either the meaning of life or the refinement of abilities meant for humans. In other words, there is a call to live a human life. This kind of life also distinguishes humans from non-human beings. Being a human implies the capacity to rationalize, and this ability allows a human person to make sense of the past, present, and future. Gadamer (1976) echoes Aristotle's concept of logos and states that this logos is only given to humans. Such is a feature unique to man, enabling him to understand time yet be able to go beyond it. A profound example would be talking about something that is not present. A human being can talk about that thing in the present, but that thing might be something that already happened in the past, or it might be something that is being imagined happening in the future. The past, present, and future are all seen in this sample situation. However, Aristotle's concept of logos is more than that. It also implies a sense of ethical concerns— what is right and wrong (Gadamer, 1976). Hence, such an idea of logos is a good context in which to begin understanding the moral bearing in this ability to look back and forward.

Today, we never fail to live our present. We wake up and do our work. We live. But in terms of consideration between the past and the future, we give so much emphasis on the latter. Our inclination dwells so much on technological advancements, trying to make any possible progress that would make us have what we believe is a better future. Contemporary society gives so much attention to technological advancement, unceasingly pursuing what we think will lead us to a better future. While such a kind of progress is also beneficial, focusing on it alone tarnishes our humanity in ways we do not even recognize. Martin Heidegger, in his Memorial Address, introduces two modes of thinking: calculative and meditative. Calculative thinking is a way of thought that remains on the surface. It does not dig deeper into the totality of beings and, therefore, is shallow in comparison with meditative thinking. As Heidegger describes:

> *Calculative thinking computes. It computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities. Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is* (Heidegger, 1966, p. 46).

On the one hand, this type of thinking reduces beings, especially non-humans, to mere instruments for achieving human goals. This way of thinking diminishes the total intrinsic worth of non-human beings. On the other hand, meditative thinking leans toward deep reflection on the nature of existence.

Heidegger (1966) warns that modern society is in "flight from thinking," not because thinking itself is inherently complex, but because we neglect the kind of reflection that engages with our immediate reality. As calculative thinking dominates, humans lose balance and give much more weight and bearing to scientific and technological advancements. The vast majority of the modern-day population believes that "modern science is the road to a happier human life" (Heidegger, 1966). However, this kind of thinking prohibits and confines us within the limits of scientific progress, dismissing the richness of a more profound way of thought found in meditative thinking.

The stance of Heidegger implicitly points to the idea that the ability to make sense of time is important for achieving a meaningful life. The distinctive quality of being a human, such as looking back on the past, should be seen as an essential part of understanding the present rather than be seen as a hindrance to progress. Hence, a balance is needed among these periods of time. This kind of perspective reflects Heidegger's focus on autochthony—rootedness. Genuine human fulfillment is possible if one remains connected to his essential nature, his rationalization capacity. A well-grounded man not only lives to survive but also takes time to reflect and pursue a more profound understanding of all that is. In this sense, thinking becomes more than just an intellectual activity. It becomes an essential part of what it means to be human.

1. Reclaiming our Roots

The need to look back has never been more urgent with the fast-paced and fleeting quality contemporary time offers to humanity. The shift from being grounded in our history and culture to becoming detached from our natural and philosophical origins is dangerous. As beings capable of thought, we must reclaim such awareness. In this case, revisiting the rich meaning of culture is indeed of great help.

Erazim Kohák, in *A Human's Place in Nature* (1984), emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the etymology of culture. "*Culture is a matter of cultivation, echoing the Latin cultus, which means the yielding of respect, honoring the sacredness of all that is*" (Kohák, 1984). This understanding expands the concept of culture beyond human constructs. It implies a deep respect for all forms of being, including non-human entities. Through this lens, humans are not meant to dominate nature for their ends. Instead, nature serves as a guide for self-cultivation, shaping our existence to foster harmony and respect.

Kohák (1984) goes further by stating that in ancient Rome, a "*man of culture*" was referred to as *homo humanus*. Kohák describes this person as someone who engages with knowledge and at the same time lives in a way that honors the interconnectedness of all that *is*. This historical perspective reminds us of the role nature plays in our lives. Nature should never be seen as separate from humanity or as a mere resource to be exploited. Instead, there is a call for humans to cultivate a bond with nature, using it as a guide for self-improvement and moral living.

2. Overcoming the Thoughtlessness of the Present

However, in today's world, humanity seems to be in a state of great slumber. Heidegger laments this loss of reflection, warning that:

> *All of us, including those who think professionally, as it were, are often enough thought-poor; we are far too easily thought-less. Thoughtlessness is an uncanny visitor who comes and goes everywhere in today's world. For nowadays we take everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly.* (Heidegger 1966, p. 44-45).

Modern man prioritizes immediate satisfaction of desire, focusing on speed and efficiency over reflection. We tend to look forward, no longer taking the time to ponder our past and embody the wisdom of homo humanus. We fall into the trap of unquestioningly embracing technological and economic advancements, believing that they provide a fulfilling human experience.

This mindset leads to many contemporary problems, issues that not only threaten our identity as thinking beings but also jeopardize the broader ecological and philosophical communities to which we belong. In our relentless pursuit of progress, we risk losing sight of what being human means. Detachment from our roots calls for a deeper reflection on how we situate ourselves within the world. By analyzing the three orders presented by Kohák— the order of being, the order of time, and the order of eternity— we can better understand the justification and reclamation of humanity. This study argues that this understanding reinforces the idea that moral awareness requires a direct, rather than merely instrumental, duty to the natural world.

The Concept of Orders

1. The Order of Being

The philosophical idea of being, implicitly extending to matters concerning the hierarchy of being [2], was explored by various Greek philosophers as early as ancient times. Mahoney (1987) notes that in Lovejoy's presentation of the origins of the *Chain of Being* [3], Plato and Aristotle are seen to have provided the "ingredients". As Lovejoy describes, the Chain of Being is "*ranked in a series that rises from nothingness through the inanimate world into the realm of plants, then into that of the animals, then humans, and above that through angels or other immaterial and intellectual beings, reaching its goal or terminus in God*" (Mahoney, 1987, p. 211). Understanding this concept is crucial in grasping Kohák's idea of the order of being.

Echoing Saint Augustine's esse qua esse bonum est ("being is good simply because it is"), Kohák (1984) emphasizes that at its most basic level, in the order of being, humans are justified. This claim might seem debatable, especially since it has become an abstract concept often used in philosophical discussions, far removed from real human experience. However, Kohák offers several justifications for Saint Augustine's point by considering the hierarchy of being.

(1) The Boulder:

Kohák (1984) begins by noting, "*good it is that the boulder is, that there is something when there could so easily be only the vast emptiness of nothing*" (p. 95). He further references William Carlos Williams' haiku—"*so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow....*"—and links it to the goodness in beings' being that Saint Augustine discusses (Kohák, 1984, p. 95).

(2) Snakes:

Even though snakes have a negative reputation, they play an important role in the order of being. Kohák (1984) explains that, according to ancient beliefs, a snake placed beneath the threshold was thought to protect the home's welfare. He empathizes with this belief and finds it understandable. He also says that a "value-free" reality is wrong, explaining that it's just a human-made idea that ignores deeper values that might exist whether people notice them or not.

(3) Humans:

Bounded by time, humans often fail to recognize the goodness of their existence. It is because being is being overshadowed by the moral quality of their actions, whether good or bad. Nevertheless, the justification of humanity aligns with the concept of temporality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings simply by virtue of existence. Kohák (1984) concludes this section with the reflection: "*So I, too, am, still before the house, beneath the stars, watching the dying embers of the fire, justified, like the boulder and the snake, simply by the fact of my being*" (p. 96).

It is important to note that Kohák emphasizes the phenomenological aspect of existence rather than relying solely on reason. While it may seem straightforward to argue that each being fulfils its role in the natural order and that its mere existence affirms its justification in the order of being, the idea of the goodness of being can seem irrational, especially when some beings cause harm to others. Still, Kohák makes a strong case that simply existing gives a being its rightful place in the world, stressing that real, lived experience is key to truly understanding this.

2. The Order of Time

Kohák (1984) believes that "*our being is also intrinsically temporal*" (p. 97). Our existence is not just something we are; it is something we actively live through and experience, unfolding continuously over time rather than existing as a fixed fact. This perspective on human temporality is important to understand, as recognizing the goodness of existence is significant but not sufficient on its own. Kohák raises an important point that alongside being, humans are also engaged in doing:

> *As humans, we are—but we also do, and our acts do not simply happen. We need to envision alternatives and choose among them—and our choice can make the difference between a forest culled, clear-cut, or bulldozed and asphalted for a parking lot. Our being is also intrinsically temporal, an act and a process as well as a fact* (Kohak, 1984, p. 97).

The fact that humans are doing in the midst of their being implies their capacity for choice, distinguishing them from other beings in the natural world. Human choices are pivotal factors in their justification within the order of time. Humans can glimpse eternity within time through moral actions, a concept discussed in The Order of Eternity.

Regarding the moral aspect of human choices, Kohák (1984) emphasizes that the "periodicity of being" presents the first awareness of its "rightness," the moral sense of life, where there is room for everything, but not just anything, at any given time (p. 97). Amidst all experiences and the choices humans can make, not everything is always suitable. The right timing for something contributes to our understanding of what is moral.

To reinforce Kohák's claim on "rightness," several related concepts are worth considering, including the Greek notion of *kairos* regarding time. Smith (1969) explains that "*kairos* points to a qualitative character of time, to the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen at 'any' time, but only at 'that time,' marking an opportunity that may not recur" (p. 1). In the field of rhetoric, *kairos* is defined as the "right or opportune time to do something, or the right measure in doing something" (Kinneavy, 1986, p. 80). Scholars often cite Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a foundation for understanding this concept. However, *kairos* can also be viewed through the lens of morality. Citing Levi's writings on Aristotle's work, Kinneavy and Eskin (2000) note that two of the three key elements of ethical argument—good character (*arete*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—are closely related to *kairos* (p. 440). Kohák (1984) provides an example of how his idea of "rightness" coincides with the concept of *kairos*:

> *For years, the National Park Service made a practice of culling the herds of wild horses in the Grand Canyon. Perhaps a decade or so ago, the practice aroused public indignation, including mine. I can remember the pictures of the magnificent, free animals transformed by a single rifle shot into pained and bloody wreckage to be sold for dog food. I remember the pain at the thought and the immense sense of relief upon reading that the practice had been terminated. But the story did not end there. The herds, with few natural enemies, multiplied precipitously, far too fast for the fragile ecosystem of the canyon. In a few years, its vegetation was devastated, its hoof-beaten slopes eroding, starving burros dying painfully each winter.* (Kohák, 1984, p. 99).

Kohák (1984) considers this a difficult lesson because of the bittersweet reality it raises. He further explains that utility values are not and will never be values of goodness. Destructive acts can never be seen as good but rather as painful actions driven by love. The harshness of utility is as morally wrong as being overwhelmed by unchecked sentimentality (p. 99). Here, a moral insight emerges similar to Aristotle's concept of

mesotes [4], the call to avoid excess at both extremes. Such a lesson might be difficult for Kohák, but it reveals another important insight into human temporality:

> *… this time in its progressivist and historicist guise, is the opposite recognition, that so much of the evil, so much of the suffering to which humankind have for generations resigned themselves, is in truth not at all inevitable, and that the passage of time can actually make a difference* (Kohák, 1984, p. 99).

Here, suffering and evil, though they may appear inevitable, are not necessarily so. The human capacity for reason and choice can make a profound difference in the natural order. That is why it is essential for humans to act as humans: to think, to choose, and to remain grounded. Heidegger speaks of autochthony. Such rootedness reveals purpose, and that purpose is made visible through the choices humans make. "*Humans are justified by their ability to do good*" (Kohák, 1984, p. 101).

3. The Order of Eternity

While Kohák (1984) discusses "eternity" several times in *A Human's Place in Nature*, his articulation of the order of eternity is not as direct as the other orders. He uses lightning as a metaphor for this order, saying that eternity is not some separate realm, cut off from the order of time, nor is it just an endless stretch of it. Instead, it integrates with time, shifting how we experience the present moment. Rather than viewing time purely as a sequence of past and future, it reorients us to see it through the lens of good and evil (p. 102). It is described as a vision of an ideal state or moral perfection not bound by time. It represents the eternal or timeless understanding of what is truly good and perfect—something that exists as an unchanging, eternal truth.

By understanding the three orders—the order of being, the order of time, and the order of eternity—man's place in nature is unveiled. "*It is as dwellers in time that humans find their place in nature; it is as bearers of eternity that they find their justification*" (Kohák, 1984, p. 103).

Justification of Man's Place in Nature

When society becomes overly focused on progress without adequately reflecting on the past, it risks fostering a kind of thoughtlessness—an indifference toward beings regarded as lower in the hierarchy of existence. Humans, occupying the highest position in this hierarchy, are distinguished by form, life, feeling, and reason. In contrast, inanimate objects possess only form, plants possess form and life, and animals possess form, life, and feeling. However, the human capacity for rational thought does not entitle us to exercise unchecked domination over other forms of life.

In the contemporary world, consumption is clearly a necessary aspect of human survival. As Dy (2013) puts it, "*human nature is an embodied spirit*" (p. 33), meaning

that our survival depends on an active relationship with the material world. Yet, in seeking personal fulfilment and asserting our individuality, many humans increasingly exploit nature, often forgetting that it is fundamental to our own development and self-cultivation.

Today, rapid technological change often goes hand in hand with the heavy use of natural resources. It is commonly assumed that such progress brings fulfilment and proves human uniqueness. However, this belief deserves closer examination. Humans consume resources on a much larger scale than other beings in nature, often without sufficient attention to the environmental impact. This reality makes us pause and ask a tricky question: if our existence carries such a high cost for the world around us, what truly gives us the right to claim a place within it?

The answer is not in domination or unchecked consumption but in our capacity to recognize and uphold a moral responsibility to the world around us. Even in the face of the damage humanity has caused, our existence retains its justification. Kohák (1984) offers a meaningful framework for understanding this through three interconnected orders: the order of being, the order of time, and the order of eternity. In the first, the order of being, human existence is affirmed as inherently good. As Kohák (1984) writes, "humans are—and to be is to be good" (p. 95). In the second, the order of time, we understand our place within the flow of history, shaped by time and space. We reflect on our past, consider our present, and anticipate the future through reason. Finally, with this same capacity for reflection, we glimpse what Kohák (1984) calls the eternal—the true, the good, and the beautiful—expressed through the third order, the order of eternity.

Positioned between temporality and eternity, humans have the unique ability to engage in moral action toward both human and non-human beings. This moral engagement allows us to perceive beauty and glimpse eternity. Kohák illustrates this idea with a striking metaphor:

> *The eternity is not 'other' realm, discontinuous with the order of time, nor an infinite prologation [sic] of it. It really does ingress in time, reorienting the moment from its horizontal matrix of the before and after to a vertical one of good and evil. To me, lightning became the most vivid metaphor of the ingression. In the solitude of the rain-drenched forest, it is an awesome phenomenon. I would sit in the doorway, staring into the darkness. The clearing, usually starlit, would be immersed in the darkness under the heavy overcast: I could not even distinguish the edge of the tree line. Then, suddenly, without warning, the whole clearing would be illuminated in a pale violet light, every detail clear, cut off sharply from the invisible 'before' and 'after,' frozen in an absolute presence, utterly still. I don't think I have ever seen movement by lightning. That may seem possible in an urban context where the moment of illumination, though far brighter, is continuous with the neon-lit flow of time, not cut off by intense darkness from the before and after…. The flash of*

> *lightning presents a moment of the world's being taken out of the context of its temporality* (Kohák, 1984, p. 102).

This insight highlights the need for a genuine connection between humans and non-human beings. Such a bond should grow over time, shaped by life, love, and hard work, changing the way we think—from seeing nature as something to own to recognizing it as something we share. Non-human beings are not just things we possess; they live alongside us in the same world. Kohák highlights this when he writes, "*The personal experience of a bond between a person and the land he tills, the worker and the familiar tool which is the companion of his labor, the person and his body—those are not experiences of possession and domination but of being at ease, at home with each other, of belonging together*" (Kohák, 1984, p. 107). This perspective calls us to recognize non-human beings for their instrumental value and their intrinsic worth. Since these beings lack the capacity for rational thought, we are responsible for guiding the world from the limits of temporality into the realm of eternity. In doing so, we preserve the beauty at the intersection of time and eternity rather than allowing it to slip away. This moral duty represents our direct responsibility, justifying our place in nature and reaffirming our humanity.

On the Problem of Man's Duty toward Nature

The question of what humanity owes to nature has been debated for a long time, yet it remains largely unanswered and often ignored. For example, Immanuel Kant suggests that our responsibility toward non-human beings is indirect rather than direct. He states, "*The environment, trees, rivers, species, ecosystems, animals—all nonpersons—are relegated to thinghood, unworthy of respect in their own right*" (Kaufmann, 2003, p. 12). This view stems from his categorical imperative, which only assigns intrinsic value to humans, placing all other entities into mere things. Kant asserts that "*since persons are the only entities that are valuable in themselves, nonpersons—things—have derivative value only and are supposed to be manipulated in accordance with the wills of persons and used for their good*" (Kaufmann, 2003, p. 12). From this perspective, our moral obligations are directed solely toward humans, who possess reason and intrinsic worth. Thus, our duties toward non-human beings are merely indirect, based on how we treat them in relation to our moral duties to other humans. Kant's framework reserves intrinsic value exclusively for humans, reducing all non-human beings to tools for human use.

I strongly disagree with Kant's view. Thinking this way encourages human arrogance and pulls us away from the true heart of being human. When we treat non-human beings as nothing more than tools for our use, we lose sight of our deeper nature. As Kohák (1984) points out, we can only rediscover our true humanity by letting go of the arrogance that comes with trying to dominate nature. This idea ties into Kohák's larger vision of the three orders—being, time, and eternity. To truly understand our place

in the natural world, we must move past the narrow view that values things only for their use. Non-human beings have their worth, apart from anything they can do for us. Our duty to non-human beings is not indirect. It is a fundamental part of what it means to live morally and to understand our place in the larger flow of time and existence. Because we are capable of reason, we have a responsibility to see this clearly and act accordingly.

Furthermore, we must resist the urge to judge non-human beings only based on their usefulness to us. Just because non-human beings cannot think or speak like humans does not mean they are less critical. Kohák (1984) reminds us, "*In truth, as beings whose being is projected into temporality, we humans can claim status no more special than raccaoons, the porcupines, and the woodchucks we slaughter with our motorcar*" (p. 101). Their lack of rationality does not diminish their inherent value. If we measure their worth solely by their utility, we will never cultivate the true sense of connection that should guide our relationship with the natural world. Instead, we may be stuck in an ownership mindset, where the world we control becomes lifeless and meaningless (Kohák, 1984). By acknowledging the intrinsic worth of all that is, including non-human beings, we do more than show respect to the natural order and to nature itself. We align ourselves in the order of eternity, opening our eyes to the beauty and truth beyond mere survival. In doing so, we reclaim our humanity and fulfil our moral responsibility in the grand scheme of existence.

Conclusion

As human beings, we are uniquely equipped with the ability to think, and this capacity should guide how we live. While this ability sets us apart from other creatures, in today's world, we often fall into the trap of thinking without more profound reflection. Science and technology dominate so much of our lives. While these tools are valuable, the problem arises when we rely on them too much — when we start to see everything, including the natural world, only in terms of their usefulness to us. This thinking leads us to forget that non-human beings and nature have value in themselves, not just for what they can do for us. In the process, we risk losing what makes us truly human. We forget that as humans, we are not just thinkers but also beings of culture, *homo humanus*, meant to honor and respect all that *is,* all that exists.

This forgetfulness demands that we justify our existence within the natural world and reclaim our humanity. Kohák's concept of the orders offers a path for this reclamation. Humans, existing within the order of being, occupy a unique position at the intersection of time and eternity. At this intersection, we truly begin to see the truth, goodness, and beauty that exist in everything around us. We are, in fact, always justified in our existence, but to fully reclaim our humanity, we must assume the responsibility of becoming stewards of nature. Our duty to nature is not an indirect obligation but a direct moral responsibility that stems from our ability to reason and our role as stewards of the world. Since non-human beings cannot think for themselves, it is our duty to guide them

through our actions, enriched by years of life, love, and labor, while glimpsing the eternal truth. In this way, the goodness and beauty of nature will not fade away; instead, they will endure as long as humanity persists. Thus, we see a two-fold truth. We realize that our direct duty to nature is indeed a moral imperative. Alongside this first truth, we also recognize that this duty is an opportunity for humankind to reclaim our humanity, that by embodying this duty, we honor the natural world, affirm our place within it, and ensure that the beauty of all that *is* endures.

Notes

[2] The hierarchy of being and Kohák's order of being are distinct concepts. The former refers to the classification of all that exists, while the latter concerns the fundamental structure of reality.

[3] The Chain of Being, a concept with roots in ancient philosophy that later developed in the medieval period, is also referred to as a flexible 'hierarchy of being' in this study.

[4] Mesotes is sometimes translated as "mean" or "doctrine of the mean." In this study, the working definition is the "middle point" between two vices of extremes and excess, grounded in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. It is "determined in relation to the agent" (Aristotle 1962, xxiv). Hence, it is moving and not fixed. I connect this concept to Kohák's discussion of moral balance in human action, where the choice between extremes plays a central role in understanding utility and morality.

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