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REFLECTIONS ON STEWARDSHIP

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Throughout the history of human culture, world views of different epochs have been encapsulated in a variety of root metaphors. Greek civilization, for example, was epitomized in Aristotle’s philosophy, which in turn represented an amalgam of common sense, ordinary perception, and a functional/biological/teleological approach to reality. The real world was the world of ordinary experience in which things had functions, purposes, teloi, and characteristics that helped and hindered the performance of functions. Even rocks, putatively paradigmatic of dead matter, had functions and natures. Unlike the modern view, which sees biology as explainable in terms of physics, the Greeks saw physics as, as it were, the biology of bare matter. All things were explainable according to their own principles; there is no one science of everything.

The modern view, in turn, beginning with the scientific revolution of the Renaissance, saw the world in precisely the opposite way. Spinoza scorns teleological, functional explanations as superstitions; Descartes and Newton see the world as clockwork, as a complex mathematical machine where efficient, mechanistic, causes rule, and everything is subject to the same laws of dead matter.

It is questionable whether industrialization or the Industrial Revolution would ever have grown out of the Greek perspective. The Greek way was to understand nature, not control it. Recall that the Greeks invented the steam engine, yet saw no use for it besides serving as a child’s toy. But in the modern perspective, where the world is a machine, men can build machines according to the same principles by which the world works, and shaping the world thus becomes a value and a project.

Other cultures and thinkers see the world in other ways; as a battle ground of good and evil with everything playing a part in the cosmic struggle (Zoroastrianism); as full of demons and spirits and ghosts (Shamanism); as a Divine language to be learned and read (Berkeley); and so on. Many times these views are unintelligible to each other. Imagine the perplexity which the world works, and shaping the world thus becomes a value and a project.

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World views are hard to predict and even harder to dislodge; once established, they tend to permeate all aspects of a culture, once lost, they are difficult to recover. Who today in western society could seriously entertain an ordered, medieval, feudal view of nature and society?

In the second half of the 20th century, a new metaphor has emerged, which judges success in a variety of fields in accordance with accounting principles. If capitalism developed in tandem with modern science and democracy and individualism, accounting became the language of the excesses and complexities of industrialization. Just as modern physics rejected colors, tastes, smells, differences between life and non-life, beauty and ugliness in favor of uniform mathematical laws, bureaucratization of things too complex to deal with quantitatively eventuated in simplistic attempts to reduce much of the complexity of human activity in an industrial world to simple principles of cost accounting and balance sheets. And whereas Newtonian physics was a heroic effort to reduce the qualitative to the quantitative developed by titanic intellects, contemporary quantification of complex phenomena is laughably simplistic, bean counting developed and deployed by piss-ants.

What does all this have to do with stewardship? Before addressing this, let us attempt to clarify what stewardship means. In my view, being a steward means being entrusted with something which is preserved and improved by virtue of the ministrations of the person serving as a steward. The shepherd is a steward of his flock; it is his job and function, as Plato points out, to preserve and to improve the sheep. Though he may be paid to do so, that is in his capacity as wage earner, which is subordinate to his primary obligation to work on behalf of the animals. This concept is taken so seriously in the Bible that the shepherd becomes the metaphor, in the 23rd Psalm, for God’s ideal relationship with humans—we want no more from God than what the Good Shepherd provides for his flock.

Traditional agriculture was, through its core concept of animal husbandry, the animal agriculture of stewardship. It involved improving the life of the animal; without a shepherd, the life of a lamb would be nasty, miserable, brutish and short. The shepherd provided food during famine, water during drought, protection from predators, medical attention, help in birthing and so on, and in turn benefited from the animals’ efforts, production, or life. But while it lived, it lived better than it would on its own.

To raise animals was more a way of life than a business. This is patent in the western ranchers of today, who do what they do not so much for money as to live a certain way, a large part of which is their commitment to their animals. Why else would they spend more on the animals than they are worth to treat scour, or stay up all night with a marginal calf for a week when the economic value of the animal is $15? This is a paradigm of stewardship.

The industrialization of agriculture is an example of the accountant model gone awry. The traditional values of husbandry and way of life which characterized husbandry agriculture have given way to a bottom line agriculture, betokened by the change of name of academic from departments of animal husbandry to departments of animal science, explicitly defined in textbooks as “the application of industrial methods to the production of animals.” The new values are efficiency and productivity; nothing else matters. Agriculture is industry measured by the bottom line. Instead of working with the animals’ natures, we circumvent and ride roughshod over them to get as much “bang for the buck” as possible. And if it is at the expense of the animals’ well-being natures; or social well-being, so be it; these are qualitative notions not appearing on a balance sheet.

And this accountant view has indeed prevailed at the expense of the values just enumerated. Husbandry agriculture assures animal welfare; only if animals were well off, were they productive. Agricultural systems had to fit animal nature. Now we bend the animals to fit the systems for the sake of profit—welfare has even been redefined as productivity! Animal suffering does not appear on the balance sheet, for it is not quantifiable, and thus does not exist for the
accounting model. Not surprisingly, in swine factories sick animals are killed, not treated.

Part of the meaning of stewardship is sustainability—keeping the land and the animals eternally productive for the future. Not only ought man rest on the seventh day to replenish, so too the animals and the earth. But that is incompatible with maximum productivity, so we shore it up with herbicides, pesticides, antibiotics, vaccines, and machinery. Whereas once manure went back into the earth to nourish it, now it is a management problem. We have poisoned nature’s balance, abolished small farmers and rural communities as “inefficient economic units”. Pride, tradition, even far-reaching, long term costs to the earth or welfare costs to the animals do not compute well. If you plead the case for stewardship you are written off by the USDA as “a Goddamn Romantic, not a farmer”.

Animal agriculture is just the most obvious example of where the accounting model destroys the stewardship imperative, but by no means the only one. Consider higher education. Teachers are stewards of young minds and future citizens. Success should be measured qualitatively; do our citizens think well, research well, govern well, live lives enriched by what they have learned?

Enter the bean counters with the accountant mind set. Not surprisingly, they demand accountability. But quality does not appear in balance sheets. No problem. We substitute quantity! If it’s real, we can count it. Everything else is Romantic fluff! And so we don’t talk about the quality of our graduates, we talk about how many students we “processed last year” (a real quote!). We talk of FTE’s and student credit hours, but not of open minds who can read and critique and speak and think. We proliferate “objective” testing. Faculty are promoted by weight and volume of resume; judging quality of work invites a lawsuit.

Some years ago, I was approached by our director of audio-visual services. “How many students do you teach a year?” he inquired. “Maybe two hundred”, I replied. “Two hundred?” he scoffed. “We can put you on videotape, send it out, and you’ll reach 10,000!” “Why me?” I queried. “Because you’re a good teacher!” he asked incredulous. “Because I’m a good teacher!” I replied. “Why?” he asked, incredulous. “Because I’m a good teacher!” I replied. He did not understand, told my department head I was a smart-ass, and never spoke to me again.

When I was in college, there were no TV’s in every classroom, no videotapes, DVDs, CDs, computer problem-based learning. There were teachers and students and classrooms. Has the audiovisual age produced better graduates? I don’t think so. Computers have led to a classroom, no videotapes, based learning. There were teachers and students and classrooms. Has the audiovisual age produced better graduates? I don’t think so. Computers have led to a high concentrate—a diet. Though a small percentage of cattle get sick from such a diet, the rest grow well—well enough to more than compensate for the disease loss, which is thus rendered acceptable!

Consider the existence of liver abscesses in feet lot cattle, to a considerable extent the result of feeding cattle too “hot” – high concentrate—a diet. Though a small percentage of cattle get sick from such a diet, the rest grow well—well enough to more than compensate for the disease loss, which is thus rendered acceptable!

Twenty years ago, veterinary medicine almost lost extra-label drug use to Congressional action when it became known that veterinarians were helping to breed ant-microbial resistance by prescribing massive amounts of antibiotics for growth promotion and to cover up bad husbandry. This is far from stewardship!

Industrialized agriculture in its current form is an experiment that has failed. Not only has stewardship of animals been lost but stewardship over the earth’s resources as well. Under technological agriculture, both animal and plant, ecosystem integrity has been lost, as have air quality, water quality, soil quality, and sustainability. Instead of the traditional balanced aquarium, agriculture depends on constant inputs to achieve high production. We have, in essence, as a result of the accounting model, fouled our nest. No traditional steward would ever have dreamed of developing pesticide-resistant seeds so one could soak the earth with pesticides. Paralleling our ongoing and spiraling battle with antibiotic resistant bacteria, we need ever-increasing technology to keep from reaping disaster.

Industrialized agriculture has also destroyed rural communities of small independent farmers, what Jefferson saw as the backbone of democracy. Since the rise of confinement swine production, independent communities
have become company towns of minimum wage, often-illegal laborers, working out of necessity, not joy.

In a real sense, under husbandry agriculture, veterinarians were stewards of their communities, particularly when there is no physician, and serve as psychologist, marriage counselor, and general authority figure. In corporate agriculture, such stewardship towards the community gives way to a life dominated by the accounting model, with the veterinarian focused on profit and productivity. And obviously, in confinement agriculture, the numbers of veterinarians needed to serve agriculture is radically diminished. A million cattle in a feedlot require one veterinary consultant. The same number of cattle dispersed over thousands of acres of grazing land requires a significant number of veterinarians.

The cruel irony is that the vast majority of veterinarians would choose stewardship in a heartbeat were it available to them. The books of James Herriot are cultural icons; they have served as a beacon calling millions of idealistic young people to a veterinary career. Will a James Herriot emerge from the rank of corporate consultant veterinarians to inspire the next generation and to sing the same of stewardship? Highly unlikely!

I do not believe that any veterinarians deliberately made a free and rational choice of the accountant approach to agriculture and the correlative implicit rejection of stewardship. Like much social evil, like the universities aping profit-making corporations despite the lack of quantitative bottom line in institutions of higher learning, it simply happened. Any culpability on the part of veterinary medicine comes from its failure to reflect on the changes we have noted. Given the enormous amount of material relevant to veterinary medicine growing exponentially each year, veterinary education and continuing education have little time for philosophical reflection; one cannot criticize a world view like the accounting model if one is not aware of its encroachment. Indeed, in the absence of reflection, we lose freedom, autonomy, the ability to choose, as surely as if a decision has been dictatorially mandated. No one forced the veterinary model onto higher education; it just happened, and we are a fait accompli before anyone realized it.

There are signs that society is reacting against certain major aspects of the accounting model, particularly as regards agriculture. Consider the wholesale European demand that we back off from industrialized agriculture, even if it means higher food prices. Consider George Gaskell’s revelation that accepted regulator “wisdom” which says that Europeans reject genetically modified organisms out of fear is false; the rejection in fact stems from concern that GMOS violate moral principles. Gaskell has in fact shown that Europeans will accept significant risks associated with biotechnology if great benefit is at stake—it is morality that leads to the rejection of biotechnology, particularly in the area of animal use.

The rise of the environmental movement in a brief period during the 1960’s also bespeaks social rejection of an accounting model when society understands its consequences. In 1966, I answered a survey a survey conducted by Phi Beta Kappa of City College of New York alumni. The survey asked respondents to list the top problems facing the U.S. I was the only person to list environmental despoliation. And yet, in 1970, barley four years later, we had Earth Day.

Husbandry and stewardship are too ingrained in the human spirit to give way to the accounting model without a fight. Hence the recent demands written by the veterinary community that organized veterinary medicine takes strong positions on some of the more egregious aspect of industrialized agriculture, such as forced molting of laying hens and sow stalls. And it is natural and appropriate that veterinarians lead in the restoration of stewardship.

By nature, veterinarians are advocates for animals as objects of moral concern. Yet they are also sensitive to the needs of producers. Indeed, it was inevitable that producers turn to veterinarians for guidance as confinement agriculture developed. Dr. Hugh Lewis relates that on assuming the deanship at the Purdue College of Veterinary Medicine, he sent letters to all users of veterinary services in Indiana, asking for a frank report on how well the school was meeting their needs. He was surprised when the swine producers responded that although the school earned high marks for herd health, nutrition, and disease control, they had fallen down in alerting the producers to when they were pushing the animals too hard to be acceptable to the social ethic.

Veterinarians can help resist the seemingly relentless encroachment of industrialized agriculture into the realm of stewardship. Veterinarian George Bergman has single-handedly taught small husbandry-based pig farmers to survive in Michigan, while, nationally, we have lost 80% of our smallswine producers. Veterinarians Harry Gorman and David Neil were instrumental in creating federal law to extend the protection of stewardship to laboratory animals. Veterinarian Don Klinkerman led Colorado to pass the nation’s strongest anti-downer bill. Veterinarian Kristina Forslund, in tandem with the legendary Astrid Lingren, led Sweden to create legislation massively rejecting industrialized agriculture. Veterinarian Tim Blackwell has roundly demonstrated the economic benefits to rejecting sow stalls when capitalizing new swine barns. And the California Veterinary Medical Association has recently adopted eight principles for animal use designed to lead in reform of confinement agriculture and other questionable practice involving animals.

But before we stand a chance of reversing the loss of stewardship in agriculture, we must go beyond individual action. Veterinary medicine as a whole must philosophically examine regnant paradigms governing the status quo and must take emerging social ethics for animals and the environment seriously. Veterinarians enjoy great status in society, and for veterinary medicine to speak with one reflective voice on behalf of stewardship would be an enormous inspiration to society in general.

The forces supporting the accounting model are well entrenched and very powerful. For example, for many years large corporate entities and drug companies have sold small farmers on the message that industrialized agriculturalists were just another set of farmers struggling to get along, rather than the entities most responsible for the demise of husbandry-based stewardship-motivated agriculture. They have been successful in dividing their opponents by portraying “animal rightists” and environmentalists as “the enemy.” The Animal Industry Foundation was chartered to fight any intrusion by animal welfare advocates into agriculture. The group was largely funded by the drug companies, who fully realize that a more humane, stewardship-orientated agriculture, is less pathogenic, and uses less drugs!

Veterinarians’ expertise in understanding social ethics must be augmented to the level of their medical expertise. Their
inherent commitment to stewardship must be reawakened and articulated. And they must pass these teachings to the community in general, whose positive feelings for stewardship and animal ethics are frustrated by lack of understanding and direction. It may well be possible to reverse the ever-increasing domination of the accounting model, and there is no more exigent place to begin than with regards to agriculture. At the same time, academic faculty must rise up against the accounting model in higher education. Qualitative values that are not measurable represent the most important concerns in human life where one has assured survival; they should not be allowed to be buried under an onslaught by bean-counters.