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Paul B. Sears

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BEYOND SPACESHIP EARTH: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND THE SOLAR SYSTEM

EUGENE C. HARGROVE, ed.
Sierra Books, 1986. Pp. xv + 335. \$25.00.

The title of this work of sixteen authors implies conditions that are not likely to be included in the working ideas of the average human being. With his innate preference for magic he finds it hard, if not impossible, to think of the solid earth beneath his feet, the seas over which he sails, and the air he breathes and through which he now flies, as parts of a whirling globe, one among others revolving around a sun that radiates heat and light.

Nor is he likely to think of the stars he sees at night (if far enough from city lights) as vast numbers of suns, each with its zone of direct influence—its own “solar system.” He swallows the glib expression “star wars” as a title for projects necessarily limited to our own such system. The nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is estimated as being three and a half light years away from us. To reach it from Earth would require that length of time *travelling at the speed of light*.

Further, the title suggests the importance of a neglected element in human ethical thinking—the evil of sponsoring or even tolerating individual and social behavior that goes against the known rules of experience in the physical world. An example is the evil of irresponsible breeding, which in man as in other animals leads to overcrowding and the breakdown of behavior patterns. As founder and editor of the journal *Environmental Ethics* and editor of *Religion and Environmental Crisis*, Eugene Hargrove is eminently qualified to encourage discussion of the ancient yet ever vital problem of good and evil.

Such discussion is here grouped under six sections—Introduction, The Social Dimension, Scientific and Technological Issues, Philosophical and Environmental Issues, The Human Dimension, and The Political Dimension. A section in turn may involve two to five chapters. There are also slightly more than three pages of bibliographic notes, a list of contributors, and an excellent index.

The pause in space exploration following the tragic Challenger explosion of 1986 is proof of the debatable character of that enterprise. This is evident in reading the various chapters of *Beyond Spaceship Earth* and is expressed by a paragraph on page 301 in a chapter entitled “The Human Dimension” by John B. Cobb Jr. in his section “Theology and Space.” Thus:

Overall in this section I have wanted to indicate a duality of emphasis with a common Western consensus. The consensus has to do with the specialness of this planet and the importance of what happens on its surface. The duality has to do with the two themes of advancing domination of nature on the one hand and suspicion of human pretensions and human power on the other. My assumption is that the present attitudes toward the conquest of space express these two themes. Some call for such conquest as the further realization of human potentiality, and others decry it as an expression of the same destructive attitude that has already done so much harm to this planet.

To this reviewer the space issue has long appeared as a matter of priorities rather than alternatives. In 1957 he expressed this view in an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled "The Inexorable Problem of Space,"¹ not to belittle "Outer Space" exploration, but to urge that priority be given to responsibility for the space that sustains humanity, that is, the planet Earth.

These remarks, it should be noted, were based upon his professional studies of the degree to which humanity has lowered the capacity of its planetary environment to sustain life and his knowledge that, as early as 1912, attention was shifting from the fitness of the organism to survive to the fitness of the environment to sustain such a system as life. And, as Herderson's *Fitness of the Environment* testifies, there is increasing reason to question such fitness elsewhere in our system besides on Earth. In the words of an early astronaut, "The more I learn about other planets, the better this one looks to me."

It may be of some interest to note that the journalistic silence following the presentation of "The Inexorable Problem of Space" was deafening, and in particular that a story by an intelligent and informed newsman was killed "on orders."

It is heartening to know that twelve years later, speaking from a similar podium, the eminent astronomer and astrophysicist Walter Orr Roberts concluded a valuable report² on the space adventure with a reminder that the "good earth" is after all our home and asking "What better step at this time than to internationalize our efforts in space and to direct them largely to improving the abode of man and achieving peaceful relationship among nations?"

Meanwhile, to those who pin their support on the idea that other planets and/or their satellites may be a source of minerals to sustain earth's economy, it may be in order to respectfully suggest: (a) a study of the problem of maintaining human activity outside of our atmosphere; (b) a

1. See R. Kargon, *The Maturing of American Science* 131-153, 225-230 (AAS 1974).

2. *Id.*

thorough apprenticeship in the mining and transport of minerals; and (c) a study of avoidable wastes in our economy.

For them and the general public, there might be added a view of one of the late J. N. (Ding's) Darling's greatest cartoons. Here he showed the enthusiastic landing of an expedition on a rich and beautiful island that promised a fulfillment of all dreams. The next panel shows the personnel leaving the battered and ruined remains of the island and setting forth in search of a new Paradise.

PAUL B. SEARS
Taos, New Mexico