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DHC 180

Book Review Writeup

Review of Pollution and the Death of Man

Pollution and the Death of Man was originally published in 1970 by Francis Schaeffer. The version I have has a conclusion chapter that was written and published later by Udo Middlemann. Middleman’s chapter didn’t really add anything substantial to the book in my opinion, so I won’t review it. Pollution and the Death of Man is a religious book that mainly focuses on Christianity and its role in preserving nature. Throughout the book, the main lessons I learned were that humans have polluted which is bad, pantheism (the idea that humans and nature are all part of one essence) doesn’t solve it, and platonic Christianity (the idea that heaven is so high and heavenly that nothing on Earth really matters) doesn’t solve it either. Schaeffer argues that the only way to solve the issue of pollution is to think of humans and nature as God’s creations, and to respect them all accordingly. What he generally means by this is that God created the universe, and to disrespect the universe would be to disrespect God himself. Additionally, nature doesn’t belong to us as humans, so we have to treat it with respect and not hurt it for the sake of hurting it. An example Schaeffer gives is moss on a rock. Because that moss and that rock are both creations of God, then it is wrong for a human to come along and tear the moss off the rock and leave it to die. However, Schaeffer argues that it is perfectly reasonable to chop down a tree, as long as you are doing so in order to use the tree, rather than just for the sake of chopping down a tree. He further argues that it is better for nature and humans in the long run if we took our time and maybe spent a little more money to preserve nature. He gave two good examples of this. The first was strip mining. He said that if the miners took their time and carefully removed the topsoil, then put it back when they were done, the area wouldn’t turn out as an ugly desert. The second was a village in the Swiss Alps that got electricity after existing for centuries without it. Instead of cutting a path through the forest and hanging power lines, they took a little extra time and put the lines underground, preserving the natural beauty of the surrounding area. Schaeffer concludes with the idea that just because you can do something, doesn’t mean you should, and that extends to our actions in respect to nature. He argues that if we unnecessarily disrespect nature, then it will lessen us as humans, which will be detrimental all around.

Overall, I agreed with most of what the author had to say. Initially, I wasn’t aware that this book was very religious, and I honestly picked it because it sounded cooler than all the textbook-esque options. When looking at the summary of the book, I noticed that it mentioned Christianity, but I was more interested in the fact that the book was less about “we need to do this thing in order to reverse global warming” and more about “as humans, this is our role with respect to nature”. Personally, that stood out to me because everything I’ve really heard about nature and the environment has been something along the lines of “humans are terrible and capitalism is destroying the world and everybody needs to drastically change the way they live or we’ll all die”, which gets kind of old. Therefore, I was excited to read something new and refreshing, while still getting a better understanding of how I can be better for the environment.

The first main point the author makes that I really understood was that pantheism and platonic Christianity aren’t correct answers to an ecological crisis. First, the author argues that the idea of pantheism, which views humans and nature as all part of one godly essence, is flawed because it reduces humans to the level of nature. He argues this is bad because nature is not always benevolent, so we shouldn’t be apathetic to negative things. He continues by saying that if someone dies to a plague or weather, pantheism basically believes that that’s just how it is, a sort of “nature giveth, and nature taketh away” mentality. Furthermore, Schaeffer argues that pantheism doesn’t allow humans to progress, because in the belief that everything is of a heavenly essence, we can’t cut a tree down because it is as holy as we are. Schaeffer argues that platonic Christianity doesn’t hold an answer either, because it does a similar job of making nothing matter, due to the belief that heaven is so high and heavenly, that’s the only thing that matters. This belief allows humans to do whatever they please to nature, as long as they get to heaven when they die. I agree with the author on these points, because while I understand the pantheistic view of everything being part of one essence, as humans we still need to be able to use the resources around us to live better lives.

The second point that really resonates with me is the idea that nature and humans are all God’s creations, and we should therefore treat nature with respect. The author talks about the order of nature, and how humans are “above” animals, plants, and what he refers to as “the machine” (everything non-living basically, so rocks, gravity, water, etc.). Because of this order, he argues that humans have the ability to use nature to their advantage, but asserts many times that we shouldn’t take advantage of nature. He does a good job of explaining that because God created nature, it doesn’t belong to us, and as such we should treat it with respect.

This ties in very well to the third main point I got from this book. Schaeffer makes it very clear that when we do kill things in nature, we do so for a productive reason. An example he gives is that it is fine to “bark the cork tree in order to have use of the bark”, but it’s bad to “bark the tree simply for the sake of doing so”. I like these two points quite a bit, because they make a lot of sense to me, and in my opinion are a good mindset to have when it comes to nature and the environment.

Overall, I enjoyed this book. It was a deceptively short read of about 120 pages, with a fairly easy vocabulary throughout. While I’m not religious hardly at all, I think that the lessons the author gives can be learned by pretty much everyone, because while some points hinge on the belief in God, most of them can be palatable without. As far as reviews go, I agree with what Tim Challies says at the end of his review: “Schaeffer does what he does best, providing a logical, consistent, biblical response to a matter that really matters”. Furthermore, I think Dean C. Clark on Amazon does a really good job of summing up the book in a few short sentences with his review of the book. Finally, I have to disagree with Joseph Roberts’ Amazon review, because while someone who doesn’t agree with Christianity could believe that Schaeffer was “illogical”, he was far from “incoherent”. I would give this book an 8 out of 10, because it did a wonderful job of explaining our role as humans with respect to nature, especially in chapter 5, but became a little long winded in the beginning, taking on more of a journal critique than anything.

References:

Amazon reviews:

Dean C. Clark: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2QYVGVA892IBS/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=143351947X>

Joseph Roberts: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2YRDMBJ8BVQ0I/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=143351947X>

Tim Challies’ review: <https://www.challies.com/book-reviews/book-review-pollution-and-the-death-of-man/>