

CHAPTER ONE

Recreation and Soteriology

Nature-Worship is assumed to be an essentially pagan characteristic, and Christianity . . . aiming at things that appear not, seems to centre its efforts on drawing man away from the contact and tangle of matter, that he may rise to a life supernal.

—Rev. Joseph McSorley

To seek the cool breeze of a remote alpine meadow or to spend an afternoon scrambling up a mountainside in hopes of a commanding view are undoubtedly modern desires. Such leisurely pursuits would not have appealed to Europeans of the Middle Ages but might already have been intriguing to early American settlers. Between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, ideas about the natural world in Christian societies changed dramatically: this historical shift is but one element of a broader historical revolution, the advent of modernity, which included simultaneous changes in human self-understanding, scientific curiosity, technological capacity, anthropological awareness, and sociopolitical organization. Gradually, outdoor recreation entered the cultural mainstream, and by the middle of the twentieth century the family camping trip had become an utterly unsurprising image of domesticity. To the medieval mind, however, venturing into the forest with women and children in tow would have seemed akin to the beginning of a morbid folk story and would certainly have provoked great

anxiety. The modern American enthusiasm for vigorous movement in pristine environments—mountain biking, rock climbing, camping, hiking, geocaching, kayaking, surfing, and the like—does not square with the seriousness of antiquity. Recreational enthusiasts themselves have long been aware of this historical convulsion: “Why is it that we camp and hike and ski and climb cliffs and scale peaks? Until the last two hundred years such things were simply not done. What brought about the change? What is its significance? [Why] among the peoples we are accustomed to call ‘the Ancients’ were there apparently no activities resembling those of the modern hiking or mountaineering club?”¹ How is it that Western ideas about nature and the activities appropriate for its enjoyment have shifted so dramatically during the past several centuries? Precisely when and how did these changes come about?

The central differences between modern and premodern ideas about nature are theological. For its first fifteen centuries, Christianity took nature as profane and juxtaposed it with a radically transcendent God. Human beings were the point of connection between two ontological extremes: the human body is material but animated by an immaterial, immortal soul. Medieval theology destabilized this arrangement, and as modern habits of mind evolved from the sixteenth century through the nineteenth, new ideas about nature and its theological significance flourished. These ideas celebrated the beauty and ingenuity of the created world and represented a major divergence from centuries of theological tradition. Yet no matter how far modern ideas of nature strayed from their sources, the trajectory they followed was charted by their theological histories.

The disjuncture between modern and premodern ideas about physical nature, generally, and mountain and forest landscapes, in particular, is nowhere more eloquently treated than in Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. Nicolson derives the terms *gloom* and *glory* from John Ruskin and uses them to distinguish between a premodern sentiment about rugged landscapes primarily characterized by apprehension and disdain and a modern celebration of the sublime in

nature. In her view “mountain gloom” dominated the Western aesthetic from the Hellenistic period until the eighteenth century, when it was gradually displaced by the ascendancy of “mountain glory.” Although Nicolson gives ample attention to the theological origins of this massive shift in European perceptions of nature, her narrative is premised on the view that the romantic aesthetic was a radical break with the Western intellectual heritage. She claims that the various “literary, theological, and philosophical conventions and traditions” that underwrote the European disregard for mountains and forests necessarily had to “disappear before the attitudes we take for granted [could] emerge.”² While it is clear that the onset of modernity was accompanied by radically new ideas about nature, Nicolson’s insistence that such newness requires old ideas to disappear falsely posits modernity as an absolutely secular epoch. In fact, the realization of modernity cannot be reduced to a rejection of theological tradition in favor of reason and empiricism. The new sensibilities that emerged from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the period with which Nicolson is most concerned, were not divorced from Christian thought; rather, they were born of it, produced in response to it, and perpetually indebted to it. Accounting for these debts is the primary work of this chapter.

A deeper look into theological history helps us to map the role of certain elements of religious thought as they conditioned the emergence of modern environmental consciousness, what some have called the contemporary “environmental milieu.”³ Of chief importance among these theological elements were the soteriological ramifications of the human position within the natural world. The material world had long been understood as the backdrop for the divine drama of the Creation, Fall, and redemption. The appearance of modern environmental sensibilities, evident in the aesthetics of “mountain glory” and in the proliferating enthusiasm for the natural sciences, brought nature into the foreground of this divine drama. Nature became a potential agent of salvation rather than its obstacle. This chapter charts the core features of this theological transmutation and recounts the emergence of outdoor recreation as a

distinctively modern form of leisure, characterized by its potential to “re-create” persons.⁴

For *recreation* to attain its contemporary cultural position, the theologically conservative view of nature, that is, the idea that nature is no more than brute material, eroded in three significant areas.⁵ First, notions of “mountain gloom” were superseded by a distinction between human depravity and the positive moral status of the natural world. This was a resolution of a long-standing debate about whether persons and nature shared equally in the consequences of the fall from grace. Second, Christian anthropology needed to warm to the idea that human beings could be powerful agents in their own redemption, capable of achieving progress toward their own salvation. A theology premised on a God who was the sole possessor of redemptive capacities was limited in its ability to develop soteriological rituals rooted in worldly, physical practices. Such concerns were among the central contestations of the Protestant Reformation but had been active ingredients of theological dispute since antiquity; the rise of recreation tells a story of Pelagianism’s modern resurgence. Finally, specific bodily practices had to be invested with salvific possibility. Although a variety of practices, including running, yoga, and tattooing, might now be described in such a way, walking developed as the original form of recreational salvation. Modern thinkers articulated a renewed commitment to peripatetic practice, and walking was generally associated with the capacity for self-transformation. In particular, walking in unpeopled landscapes (variously understood as countryside, wilderness, or, more simply, nature) was taken to be the most soteriologically potent activity. These three general changes were not the cause or result of an explicit rejection of theological tradition; rather, the broad arc of medieval and early modern Christianity bears evidence of gradual transmutations through which the possibility of “mountain glory” arose. An inquisitive rereading of the Western theological treatment of nature suggests some of the threads that connect our modern ideas about recreation to their theological roots.

THE NATURE OF HUMAN DEPRAVITY

Already by the era of Augustine (AD 354–430), Christianity had developed into what Lynn White Jr. proclaimed as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”⁶ The charge of anthropocentrism asserts that Christian theology is so preoccupied with its gaze toward heaven that it turned away from the material world and repudiated bodily pleasures. Augustine’s *Confessions* exemplifies this dualistic cosmology, describing God as the ontological source for the physical world but cautioning those who might be tempted to seek his presence in material terms. For example, Augustine treats the five senses as insufficient means to pursue knowledge of God and argues that our hunger for food, our desire for music, our aesthetic sensibilities, and even our curiosity to learn are as much temptations as necessities. In a moment of clear frustration with the tendency of his compatriots to revel in experiential knowledge of the physical world, he goes so far as to compare our longing to see and understand the world around us to finding pleasure “in the sight of a lacerated corpse.”⁷ Augustine’s notion of Christian duty requires the individual to devote his entire attention to God’s holy grace and to avoid mere curiosities and the distraction of material desires. This theological rendering imagines the natural world as a kind of spiritual wilderness through which human souls wander during life before being reconciled to God in the ever after. In fact, Augustine refers to mortal life as an “*immensa silva*,” an enormous forest, “full of snares and dangers.”⁸ Commentators on the *Confessions* have variously translated this term as *wilderness*, *forest*, and *jungle* to capture Augustine’s view of human life as a demanding sojourn made heavier by the burden of alienation from God.⁹ The metaphor of life as a journey through an inhospitable landscape directly invokes a biblical tradition brimming with images of triumph over barren places as a precondition for salvation.¹⁰ Our lives are but a wandering through a wasteland of sensory temptations, and we are called to enjoy only what is necessary for sustenance.

With this image of *homo viator*—the human as traveler—at the heart of the *Confessions*, Augustine's work can be read as a formative literary expression of the spiritual journey.¹¹ Although this narrative technique would have been familiar throughout Mediterranean antiquity (it was, after all, also employed by Homer and Virgil), Augustine's journey is distinctive both because it is written in the first person and because it describes the movement of a person through life as dictated by the magnetism of God's grace. *Homo viator*, the trope of wandering toward salvation, was tremendously influential for subsequent Christian apologetics as diverse as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Unlike his literary successors, though, Augustine cannot fully lay claim to his own journey, which is initiated and impelled by God. Human beings are but wishful wanderers drawn toward God's immovability. Our movement toward God is hampered, however, by our propensity to be distracted from the eternal by the material and mundane. Augustine's *homo viator* is premised on a tension, more readily apparent in medieval theology, between a good and all-powerful God working to reconcile humankind to himself and a created world that threatens to disrupt the redemptive order. In Augustine there is a delicate balance between the capacity of free will to accept God's grace and the human tendency to gravitate toward material pleasures.

This brittle arrangement attenuated the theological conflicts of Augustine's era, though it proved difficult for subsequent Christian thinkers to maintain. Augustine was compelled to find this balance because of the potential for heresy on either side. On the one hand orthodoxy was threatened by Pelagianism, which overestimated the capacity of human beings to affect their own salvation. On the other hand Manichaeism too strongly repudiated the natural world as corrupt and mistook evil as a coequal force in the universe. Augustine devoted a significant portion of his intellectual energy to combating these two philosophical views, and his effort to fend off the dual hazard they presented established a lasting set of boundaries for the contours of orthodoxy.¹² In short, a theology that simultaneously defends against Pelagi-

anism and Manichaeism necessarily articulates a view of the material world as good but not so good that it lacks the need for redemption.

Pelagius (AD 354–420) had directly challenged one of the central tenets of Christian doctrine, namely the view that human depravity is essential to our natures and is inherited by all persons from Adam himself. If humans are not fundamentally sinful beings, then the soteriological project of Christianity looks rather different: the beliefs, behaviors, and will to be reconciled to God are within the reach of human mastery. Augustine's intellectual commitment to God's perfection and absolute omnipotence placed him foremost among Pelagius's critics, who collectively condemned the notion of self-perfectibility as heresy at the Council of Carthage. Augustine argued that because a good God would not have created moral agents doomed to sin and because no sinful creature could affect salvation without God's grace, theological orthodoxy required that free will was the sole cause of the Fall and that all persons share equally in the resulting depravity.¹³ He further insisted that the journey through life and toward God was necessarily divinely directed, for if human souls can achieve redemption of their own initiative, God's grace would be superfluous. This argument raises a complex set of theological questions that motivated Augustine's extensive work on the will and memory, all of which aimed to articulate a view of the human as a moral agent helpless without God's benefaction. This extreme skepticism about the spiritual capabilities of human souls would seem to risk a Manichean view of creation, another theologically fraught philosophical position.

If life is indeed a movement from a depraved material world to a divine spiritual realm, and if this journey is precipitated and guided solely by God, then it would seem that the world of bodies and things stands fundamentally apart from the divine.¹⁴ The idea of life as an ascent from matter to spirit risks collapsing into a Gnostic disdain for God's created world, a view that Augustine had rejected after his youthful Manichean encounter. Believing that a benevolent and loving God created the material world, Augustine refutes the Manichean view that matter is inherently and fundamentally corrupt. The world and human souls alike were created by

God and are necessarily good. In the view of some contemporary readers Augustine's arguments along these lines indicate that he did not turn away from nature altogether and that his writings do include moments of natural veneration.¹⁵ For example, in *City of God* he describes at length the "wonderful qualities" of plants, the "manifold and various loveliness" of the landscape, the "grand spectacle of the sea," and the amazing "plumage and song" of various animals.¹⁶ His tempered vision of nature, however, was little more than a hedge against Gnosticism. It is clear that he believed that contemplation of things other than God and the human soul were of no soteriological benefit: the wonders of nature are only wondrous within a carefully delimited framework aimed at praising God's beautiful and useful gifts to humankind. Augustine codified Christian antiquity's view that the goodness of nature was to be defined exclusively in terms of its utility for our creaturely needs. When Augustine describes God's creation as a world particularly suited for spiritual development and human flourishing, modern readers might detect allusions to a naturalistic theology, but this interpretation is anachronistic.

In the *Confessions* Augustine regards bodily pleasures, social amusements, and natural beauty as distractions from a contemplative devotion to God. Worldly pleasures are sinful precisely because they alienate people from God, and, strikingly, Augustine holds that this is equally true of spectator sports, idle games, eating, and sexuality.¹⁷ The Christian should not deny the pleasure of eating nourishing food but should recognize that this form of pleasure is vain and impermanent. Augustine's theory of bodily existence is clearly indicated by his declaration that food is to be "taken as medicine" (10.31.43). We are by nature sick creatures and must endure the alienation of an earthly lifetime if we are to have any hope of salvation. This perspective was formative for generations of theologians who followed Augustine in seeking to understand the subtle distinction between asceticism and moderation. Various passages of the *Confessions* indicate Augustine's anxiety about how to care for the body without garnering undue pleasures: "[my body] is glad that it is not clear as to what is sufficient for the modera-

tion of health, so that under the pretense of health it may conceal its projects for pleasure" (10.31.44). Imagine his disapproval at the modern American obsession with gourmet foods and exercise regimes! Healthful living in contemporary culture has become deeply intertwined with physical pleasure, but the belief that spiritual transcendence is at odds with materiality has not disappeared from our conceptual landscape.

How has it come to pass that certain sensory pleasures are celebrated as wholesome, but others remain tainted by the ethical critiques leveled by theologians of ages past? Simply put, by what means have exercise and natural foods come to inhabit a separate category of pleasure from more licentious pursuits like gambling, gluttony, and masturbation? For Augustine these were all of a piece—what happened?

One answer might begin with a famous medieval anecdote prominently featuring the *Confessions*. On April 26, 1336, nearly a millennium after Augustine's death, the early Renaissance poet Petrarch decided to climb Mount Ventoux, near Avignon, to take in the view. Petrarch's ascent is forever remembered in his letter describing the ascent, in which he claimed to be the first to have sought the peak merely for pleasure's sake. On reaching the summit and enjoying the vista, Petrarch claims to have sat down and opened the *Confessions* and alighted on a passage from book 10 that reads, "Men go forth to marvel at the heights of mountains and the huge waves of the sea, the broad flow of the rivers, the vastness of the ocean, the orbits of the stars, and yet they neglect to marvel at themselves" (10.13.15). Dumbfounded, Petrarch shifted his attention inward, away from the vista, and found his way back to the foot of the mountain, where he wrote a penitent letter recounting the experience.¹⁸ Centuries later, Petrarch would be celebrated by outdoor enthusiasts as the father of alpinism and remembered as much for his pioneering embrace of the natural world as an aesthetic object as for his theological apologetics. This vignette illustrates two things about the role of Christianity in shaping Western attitudes about nature. First, Augustine's strict separation between the materiality of the natural world and the immateriality of the immortal soul proved a powerful conceptual

framework for a great many centuries. It endured in Petrarch's imagination and beyond. Second, even as Augustine's voice reached through the pages of Petrarch's slim volume to warn him of his hubris, the European outlook on nature had already begun to shift as early as the fourteenth century. The irony of Petrarch's letter is that, despite his self-chastisement, he had still enjoyed the view from atop the mountain and spoke enthusiastically about the journey. Though it was yet unnamed, the Renaissance had begun. Petrarch stood at the dawn of a budding humanist celebration of personhood and rediscovery of Greco-Roman ideas about nature (bucolic idylls and georgic revelries).

Petrarch's legacy is more complex than a simple break with tradition, and it is clearly more than a reluctant return to it. The ascent of Mount Ventoux represents a transitional moment in Western thinking about nature: even as Petrarch claims to defend against the idea of landscapes as the backdrop of the soteriological drama, he signals the possibility of the mountains, the sea, and the stars serving as a means of human self-contemplation. In the centuries that followed his famous climb, religiously motivated marveling at the soul within and marveling at the world about us were no longer mutually exclusive. Although a strict Augustinian would have considered it a distraction from spiritual matters, outdoor recreation developed precisely as the practice of embodied marveling at the created world. Practices such as hiking and mountain climbing developed primarily as vehicles for the very kind of soteriological soul-searching that Augustine took as fundamental to the Gospel message.

The evolution of the Western environmental imagination is easily misinterpreted. Contrary to the popular view that movements like the scientific revolution and romanticism displaced the Christian ontology articulated by Augustine and his compatriots, the emergence of a modern environmental thought drank deeply from the well of theology. The transformation of Western ideas about nature was subtle; while new ways of conceptualizing the natural world challenged the primacy of otherworldly concerns, emerging sentiments about the moral signifi-

cance of the natural world remained linked with enduring ideas about human depravity. Again, what happened? How did nature, or perhaps more modestly, the natural landscape, become an instrument for spiritual pursuits? The social and cultural revolutions that gave rise to modern ideas about nature are surely too complex to describe in their entirety.¹⁹ But keeping an eye to the elements of Christian tradition that survived the upheavals of the early modern period provides a more nuanced historical perspective than is available to those who take modernity as an absolute break.²⁰ Although the myriad thinkers who helped fashion modern environmental thought were often exploring uncharted conceptual territory, they looked to the past for inspiration and were constrained by tradition even where they sought liberation from it. As with Petrarch's cagey invocation of Augustine, Euro-American attitudes about nature have always been flavored by an ambivalent marriage of tradition and originality. The complicated legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), at once modern and reactionary, epitomizes this dual tendency.

Rousseau chose to title his autobiography *Confessions* in a gesture that clearly placed him in contradistinction to Augustine, but the contrast is not one of opposites. Rousseau's theory of human depravity strangely echoes Christian theology: like Augustine, he is preoccupied with the condemnation of the theater as manifestation of social decadence; like Augustine's, Rousseau's argument asserts that culture itself is a distraction from the inherent good of the created world. Augustine and Rousseau share a concern that social life is riddled with spiritually vapid pursuits: the dramatic arts, sports, fashion, and literature. But there are limits to the overlap between their respective views of human depravity. Most obviously, although Rousseau is critical of social forms of decadence, he parts company with Augustine's condemnation of certain bodily pleasures, namely food, sex, and sleep. In fact, Rousseau celebrates the body and perhaps values the love of self above all things, and self-love obliges bodily pleasure. Mindful of the trappings of an ethic rooted in materiality, Rousseau was careful to clarify that the worldly pleasures are not rooted in anything

“external to the self” and are instead products of “nothing but oneself and one’s own existence.” Because “everything in the world is in a state of constant flux,” genuine pleasures drawn from bodily experience are, of course, fleeting, but, more important, they are also generated by the interaction “between [one’s] immortal nature and the constitution of the world and the physical order . . . reigning in it.”²¹ This modern *Confessions*, then, draws a rather different picture of human depravity, one that impugns human society in collectivity but absolves individual human persons of any particular blame. This is a tremendously important conceptual shift that certainly reflects the new ideas about human subjectivity that emerged in the centuries between Augustine and Rousseau.²² In Rousseau, and the romantic thinkers who followed him, individuals are cleansed of the taint of original sin, but sin does not disappear, enduring instead as the limiting factor for human potential more generally. Romanticism inverted Christian soteriology by remaking sin as social rather than personal. It was, however, more than just the entrenchment of moral individualism that eroded older theological ideas about the depravity of nature and set the stage for Rousseau’s critique of social depravity.

Precisely how did Rousseau corroborate Augustine’s views of human depravity yet simultaneously celebrate certain corporeal pleasures?²³ On what grounds did they agree about the debased nature of the theater yet disagree about the spiritual value of natural observation, gustatory pleasures, and sexuality? Although it is in some ways contiguous with Augustine’s *Confessions*, Rousseau’s own autobiography makes significant departures that highlight how the advent of modernity reshaped the way that Western thinkers understood the relationship between human beings and the natural world.²⁴ Rousseau’s nostalgia for a time before social pressures dominated our lived experience radically differentiates him from theological tradition: his conceptual permutation of the Fall was limited to the social sphere and did not extend to human nature or the natural world itself. Writing against figures like Hobbes, who were cynical about human nature, Rousseau championed the inherent goodness of human beings. We are depraved, according to his view, not

because we are tainted by original sin but because we are alienated from our created natures and from the world as it was first made. For Rousseau redemption is thus a project of recovery, an attempt to return to our original nature, not an effort to overcome it. The romantic remaking of Christianity established restoration as the standard by which the trajectory of human spiritual progress should be charted.

To put this in theological terms, the specific point of disagreement between Augustine and Rousseau concerns the moment and meaning of the Fall. Where Augustine's position begins with the belief that we are by nature fallen, Rousseau asserts that the fall from grace was a historical phenomenon that occurred after Creation. We are in our natures good, but the corrosive effect of living among the unnatural demands of society has debased humankind. Rousseau's philosophy of history located human depravity as something that emerged after our time in the proverbial garden and retains much of the Christian skepticism about the moral foundations of human institutions, while explicitly rejecting the doctrine of original sin. Despite the fact that Rousseau was harshly criticized by the religious mainstream of his time, his critique of cultural decadence and nostalgia for a golden age before the emergence of rigidly structured societies is a strange reflection of Christian teleology.²⁵

In tracing the roots of human wickedness to social causes, Rousseau effectively partitions the kinds of pleasure and distraction that had so worried Christian moralists since antiquity. For Rousseau and his romantic disciples cultural pleasures like music, theater, and the arts were distinct from natural ones like walking, botanizing, and even sexuality. Natural pleasures are laudable because they are forms of self-care that seek to ameliorate the corrupting influence of society and return the individual to his or her natural state. In a passage that seems almost to respond to the excerpt from Augustine that had arrested Petrarch, Rousseau asserts that "lonely meditation, the study of nature, and the contemplation of the universe necessarily make a solitary person strive continually for the author of all things and seek with a sweet anxiety the purpose of everything he sees and the cause of everything he feels." Rousseau defends outdoor

leisure and curiosity about the natural world against claims that it is spiritually distracting by differentiating between the pursuit of knowledge as a means to social status and the pursuit of knowledge as a means to “inner enlightenment.”²⁶ Especially in his later writings, there is no pleasure more basic or natural for Rousseau than walking, which “functions as an emblem of the simple man and as ... a means of being in nature and outside society.”²⁷ In a word, Rousseau was an early advocate of recreation as a means to restore human souls to their prelapsarian status.

Rousseau stands as one of the romantic movement’s foundational figures; his scrutiny of overreaching claims of moral progress and graceful style were echoed throughout subsequent centuries. The intellectual revolution that was romanticism is conceivably understood as a release from the strictures of rationalism, but it would be an oversimplification to reduce the movement to a critique of Enlightenment triumphalism. The self—and self-care—at the heart of Rousseau’s project was not merely an expression of Descartes’s subject as thinking thing, nor was his disdain for social conformity merely the product of a rigidly hierarchical European social order. Though he certainly viewed civilization as artificial and the main source of immorality, his turn to nature addresses what he takes as an existential problem. Our depravity is the product of an inevitable social alienation, the solution for which can only be found in a return to our origin, to our most basic nature. Rousseau’s glorification of walking, botanical studies, and simple earthly pleasures as means to self-knowledge and to moral redemption represents a novel answer to long-standing theological questions about whether humans are capable of grappling with their fallen nature and about the extent to which bodily and material pleasures are obstacles to such grappling.

NATURE AND SOTERIOLOGY IN MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

The contrast between Rousseau and Augustine might be taken as evidence that modern thinkers are distinguished by a romantic idealization

of nature not found in ancient sources. The romantic movement's tendency to reject religious conformity in pursuit of poetic self-expression would seem to confirm this perspective, and for these reasons environmental historians generally take romanticism as one of the brightest stars in the constellation of modern environmental thought, alongside scientific empiricism and evolution by natural selection. But despite its formative position in the history of environmental thought, the romantic movement is not *sui generis*. A cursory examination of the romantic tradition suggests that although it was revolutionary, it did not spring full grown from Zeus's head.²⁸ For instance, Rousseau's clashes with many of the prevailing ideas of his time followed a well-established counter-cultural mode that echoed late medieval doubts about the legitimacy of humanist celebrations of progress. Romanticism is also an expression of a broader pattern of changing Christian attitudes about the material world, one that radically "recast, into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a restored paradise."²⁹ Momentous changes, including the development of scientific methods of observation and the articulation of a heliocentric universe, dramatically shifted European sentiments about nature during the early modern period. Yet even as they did so, early modern thinkers clung to certain central theological elements, notably God's omnipotence and the fallen, yet redeemable, condition of human beings.

During the late Middle Ages the influence of medieval Islamic intellectuals like Avicenna (980–1037) and Averroes (1126–98) helped reestablish the prominence of textual sources from antiquity in European centers of learning.³⁰ As late medieval theologians became familiar with the Hellenistic philosophies from which they had been estranged during the early Middle Ages, they began increasingly to see their intellectual undertaking in terms of cultural restoration.³¹ Resuscitating the ideas that had animated the highest achievements of ancient Mediterranean societies empowered late medieval intellectuals to see

themselves as significant historical actors. In conjunction with an ever more linear concept of history, a Renaissance mentality of progress and confidence in human capabilities slowly took shape during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³² The ends to which humanistic notions of progress were put redirected medieval theology; the growing confidence of Renaissance intellectuals was built from the rubble of the Middle Ages yet was still indebted to it.³³

This historiographic self-awareness differentiated late medieval thinkers from previous generations in that it signaled a budding optimism about the positive possibilities for human agency. The attempt to establish a secure basis for human achievement, the central aim of both Renaissance humanism and early modern empiricism, was a response to a cultural crisis of faith. Rene Descartes is typically credited as the intellectual figure that established a theoretical basis for objective knowledge about the material world, but his efforts in this regard were shared by many of his contemporaries who also sought to demonstrate the human capacity for understanding and manipulating the natural world. This pursuit is taken as the fundamental moment in the history of secularization. Retrospectively, the efforts of figures like Descartes and Francis Bacon to make humans the agents of their own destiny and to render the physical world as a manipulable entity seem quintessentially secular. Even so, however much the desire for objective knowledge about physical properties seems to imply a disenchanted view of nature, Descartes's great experiment cannot be separated from the motives he and his contemporaries shared. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries' turn to nature as something humans could enjoy, appropriate, understand, and master grew from a deep uncertainty about the intelligibility of the created order. The project of creating certainty and harnessing nature to a new apparatus of knowledge was the by-product of internecine theological debate.

The first significant intellectual movement to develop from the recuperation of Hellenistic learning was Scholasticism. Although Scholasticism became the dominant theological tradition in Europe between

the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, it also quickly found itself under intellectual attack, and the most successful critics were the nominalists. The nominalists objected to Scholasticism on grounds that its deployment of Platonic realism infringed on God's omnipotence. Realism is the metaphysical doctrine that the actual world is a manifestation of underlying universal ideals. Plato's famous image of the cave, in which shadows cast on the rear wall are but our dim perception of real objects beyond our comprehension, neatly describes this metaphysical position. The Neoplatonic orientation of Scholasticism held that phenomenal objects are crude manifestations of underlying universal truths. For example, individual human beings are but particular examples of the idea of man, which is, of course, God's own mental image. Insofar as Scholasticism was premised on realism, the world was understood as the manifestation of the perfect forms generated in the mind of God.

This view, however, was worrisome to nominalists, who were concerned that if the universal categories to which particular things belong are fixed and immutable—tables, persons, animals, stars, and so forth—then God's creative capacity was essentially constrained. If the being of things in the world was conditioned on perfect, eternal ideas, then God's creative power mattered only at the moment these ideas themselves were issued into being. God could not, by the logic of realism, create a thinking pebble or a star that did not emit light, let alone a human being who could survive death. Echoing Aristotle's critique of Plato's excessive realism, medieval thinkers like William of Ockham and Duns Scotus articulated the ontological disunity of things and their natures. In short, nominalists argued that the category to which a thing belonged was not to be confused with that thing itself. For example, individual persons are members of the class of beings called humans, but that category is an abstraction with uncertain ontological status. Human beings recognize one another as members of a species, but the category human does not share the same kind of being as that of actual persons. For nominalists universal categories were merely constructions that cannot be said to exist independent of particular instantiations of that category—there is

no such thing as a star without actual stars. Nominalists argued that God's omnipotence is necessarily a freedom to act in any manner whatsoever, including in direct contradiction to his previous decisions. Although many contemporary ethologists would disagree, philosophers of the Middle Ages believed that God created humans as the only talking creatures, and nominalists maintained that God could easily choose at any moment to bring articulate beasts into being. At the heart of the debate between nominalists and Scholastics was the question whether God is appropriately characterized as a will or as an intelligence: nominalists emphasized God's omnipotent will, while Scholastics maintained the Neoplatonic view of the world as a reflection of God's inherently rational nature. If God is understood in terms of absolute will, the world reflects his choices, which are by definition good but are not necessarily transparent to rational scrutiny. The tendency of this theological emphasis is toward otherworldly mysticism. If, however, God is understood in terms of absolute reason, his created order is necessarily rational, and, being created in his image, human beings possess the rational capacities to see and understand the underlying cosmic order.

For realists like the Scholastics, the order observable in nature was a reflection of the orderliness of the divine mind. Theological commitment to the correspondence between the world and God's rational blueprint for it gave rise to the concept of the Great Chain of Being, which asserted that the cosmos is necessarily a gradated hierarchy of all possible forms of being, from the tiniest grain of sand to the angels of heaven. The Great Chain of Being was central to the Neoplatonist strains of Christian theology that flourished from the latter centuries of the Roman era well into the modern era. In the name of preserving God's omnipotence, the nominalist critique asserted a material world that was not transparent to reason and that the order we perceive in the world is but mere perception.³⁴ Homer Simpson comes close to pointing out this problem when he asks whether "Jesus could microwave a burrito so hot that even he himself could not eat it?"³⁵ Theologically speaking, Homer is perplexed about whether God's power is in any way

constrained by the existence of a physical universe defined by its regularity and ontological consistency. Centuries of Christian thinkers have experienced the world we inhabit as a continuation of the world created by God at the beginning of time. Why this stable world of observable natural laws and not some radically contingent world that God creates and recreates each day anew? The nominalist critique raised important new questions about the relationship between empirical observation and theological ontology.

From the nominalist perspective the patterns apparent to human perception—gravity, the rhythm of the seasons, the plenitude of creation, and so on—remain stable only insofar as God chooses not to overturn them. Rather than accept the world as anchored by immutable ideal forms, nominalists distinguished between God's *potentia absoluta* and his *potentia ordinata*, between his omnipotent capacity and his actual will. God could do anything he pleased, and as such, the created order must be understood as contingent and provisional, requiring God's renewed assent at each moment.³⁶ This distinction proved theologically troubling: if the potential for God's will was limitless, then why did he refrain from doing all things? Nominalists imagined a God who made the world as we experience it yet also restrained himself from making it otherwise. What kind of a God appears never to adjust his creation? What kind of God would position himself at such a remove from the scrutiny of his would-be worshippers?

Nominalists themselves strictly maintained that God was ultimately unknowable and that his choices about when to act and when not to act are beyond comprehension. Radicalizing the concept of omnipotence was, after all, the basic motive of the nominalist movement. But this effort raised questions that proved tremendously challenging for late medieval and early modern theologians who struggled not only to understand an impenetrable divinity but also to make sense of the created world without the advantage of a transparent divine logic. The most basic answer to these questions was put forward in the doctrine of voluntarism, which argues that the distinction between God's *potentia absoluta*

and his *potentia ordinata* represents a voluntary choice made by God in his infinite and essentially unintelligible wisdom. The consistency of natural phenomena reflects God's choice not to further manipulate the original created order. Voluntarism describes a created world that operates independent of an actively engaged Deity—this is the theology of *Deus absconditus*, the God who withdraws from the scene after his work is complete. In this sense voluntarism presages Deism (and perhaps even the death of God) in its depiction of a creator God who magnanimously established this world of regularity and sufficiency and then withdrew into the ether.³⁷ Here the radicalism of the nominalist movement is most evident: in order to safeguard God's absolute omnipotence, nominalists articulated an unassailable and absolutely otherworldly Creator. In the wake of such theological upheavals the natural world was sanitized of miracles, and the order of nature came to be fixed with a heretofore unknown mechanical regularity.

Although it seems at first glance like a trifling and decidedly technical philosophical disagreement, the metaphysical divergences between the Scholastics and the nominalists were to have tangible and lasting impacts for the way European cultures thought about and engaged with the material world. Nominalism never secured a place for itself within the theological mainstream and, for the most part, remained a position of philosophical critique. That said, its influence was culturally pervasive, especially with respect to the origins of modern attitudes about the natural world. The intellectual fallout of nominalism powerfully reshaped theological attitudes about the ontological status of the material world and opened new avenues toward salvation and salvific processes. Medieval metaphysical debates had indirect, but important, influence on Western perspectives about the place of human beings in the natural world and were significant forces in establishing a modern mentality in which time spent outdoors could come to be invested with soteriological possibility.

The central philosophical impact of nominalism was the displacement of abstract universals in favor of concrete particulars.³⁸ As this

view permeated late medieval thought, theologians and philosophers articulated new modes of thinking about and interacting with the created, material world that placed new priority on particularity and empirical observation. Generally speaking, medieval science had looked to the material world as a confirmation of rationally ascertainable, eternal principles established at the moment of creation.

The nominalist revolution did not do away with this approach to knowledge, but it helped open new possibilities for understanding and effectively ushered in an era in which the natural world illuminated, not just validated, divine reason. Neoplatonic ideas about divine order had limited the ability of European thinkers to understand the world around them, and they had spent centuries trying to fit the square peg of nature into the round hole of theological necessity. The geocentric cosmos and the gradated plenitude of beings are good examples of the conceptual limitations of theological Scholasticism and indicate the obstructions to naturalism inherent in the kind of world European thinkers imagined a rational God would necessarily have created. A theology that did not presuppose God's will thus freed Christian thinkers to consider the workings of nature unencumbered by an anthropocentric (or, perhaps more exactly, misanthropocentric) Platonic ontology. In weakening the claim that nature had to be understood in light of a philosophically consistent theology, nominalism established the cultural conditions for an era in which nature became as instructive a source of religious understanding as was scripture. Though nominalist theologians themselves would have objected, the idea of nature as a book became the central metaphor for creation during the late Middle Ages and early modernity.³⁹

In the theological fallout over radical omnipotence, opponents of nominalism sought to decipher the book of nature, and from their endeavors were born many modern ideas about the physical world.⁴⁰ The implications of nominalism were both reactionary and reformative. Many thinkers responded to the doctrine of radical omnipotence with trepidation and sought to develop a direct response to its intimation of a

distant and impersonal God. Others absorbed the nominalist critique and transformed it in ways that were foundational for the development of modern ideas about nature. Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), Nicolas of Cusa (1401–64), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), and Rene Descartes (1596–1650) can be counted among the intellectual giants writing either in response to or in appropriation of nominalist insights. A closer examination of two distinct modes of responding to the nominalist challenge—Eckhart’s mysticism and Descartes’s empirical skepticism—suggest how deeply medieval theology influenced subsequent Western concepts about nature and the place of humans within it.

Nominalist theology was so troubling for late medieval and early modern theologians that they devoted significant intellectual energy to elucidating a more knowable, present, and worldly God. Eckhart’s mystical ontology was just such an effort and might even be described as doubling down on the logic of nominalism. Like the nominalists, he argued that the being of all things is utterly dependent on God’s will, but Eckhart took a further step, claiming that because the being of God cannot be reduced to the being of things, God must be the “operative force that determines their becoming.”⁴¹ That is to say, although the Creator cannot be synonymous with his creation, his activity is evident in the sustained being of all things.

For a mystic like Eckhart the nominalist emphasis on the radical contingency of all being did not suggest a *Deus absconditus* but rather an active, omnipresent God. The God of such mystical sustenance is the cause of all actualities and, more important, is also the source of all possibilities. Eckhart viewed the world as an “incarnation, [as] the body of God [who] is in the world as the soul is in the body, omnipresent as the motive principle.”⁴² This position counters the radical transcendence of voluntarism with a theology of radical immanence: from the perspective of mysticism God’s absolute omnipotence does not suggest a world distant from him but one immediately and universally pervaded by his presence. The radical contingency of the physical world asserted by the nominalists is here transformed into an affirmation of creation that

allows, if not encourages, the faithful to seek God's presence in nature. A world in which all things are at all times infinitely dependent on God's continued sustenance is a world where natural observation is by definition an examination of the contours of God's will in action. Eckhart's contributions to the history of philosophy are well documented, but his role as a bridge between medieval and modern ideas about nature is less well demonstrated. Through vehicles like Eckhart's mystical ontology, the aftershocks of the nominalist revolution underwrote a protonaturalist view that renders the processes of nature as a perpetual and providential unfolding of God's grace.⁴³ Such a view is first visible in Eckhart, but this perspective was also taken up by a variety of intellectual movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The belief that the natural world is pulsing with the divine later became a mainstay of romantic thought and helped invest early modern observations of nature with religious purpose. A world wherein an omnipresent Deity animated all beings meant that encounters with nature—countryside forays, agricultural labor, and so on—could become new forms of theological contemplation. The kind of reverential celebration of God's creation found in Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* would not have been possible without Eckhart's protonaturalist mysticism.

The mystical approach, though influential, was not in the theological mainstream. More formal attempts to grapple with the haunting image of a radically unknowable, inscrutable God imagined in the doctrine of *Deus absconditus* were a regular feature of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century theology, and it is in light of these rebuttals that Cartesianism appears as a rejoinder to the kind of uncertainty provoked by the nominalist critique. Writing almost three centuries after Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, Descartes set out to establish a more reliable basis for philosophical ontology and to triumph over the uncertainty inherent in a world that can no longer be explained as the manifestation of divine reason. Nominalists had presented a tremendous obstacle to the possibility of reliable scientific knowledge: the empirically observable properties of nature could not accurately be called laws so long as God's

absolute power could change them at will. The quest for scientific certainty, which he considered the linchpin necessary to achieve significant human progress, brought Descartes into direct engagement with the nominalist debates. Even in laboring to secure a bulwark against the ontological instability of nominalism, Descartes “clearly accepted the nominalistic premise that God created the world because he wanted to and not because he was determined to do so by some antecedent reason or necessity.”⁴⁴ Descartes’s quest was to harmonize this basic nominalist insight with a Scholastic pursuit of the manifest order of nature. Certainty about the created order was the first step toward a unique new form of human independence, an independence that perhaps seemed necessary because of voluntarism’s depiction of God’s remote position from human affairs. Where Eckhart’s response to nominalism was itself theological, Descartes developed a practical rebuttal, attempting to place humanity at the helm of the natural order.

The Cartesian desire for certain knowledge answers the challenge of nominalism with a lurch toward mastery—and here the Cartesian project seems a subtle reprise of Pelagian hubris.⁴⁵ The voluntarist notion of a God that deliberately chose to restrain himself from his infinite creative capacities in favor of natural laws empowered early modern thinkers to look to the operations of nature as a means to know and understand God. Descartes reasoned that the human mind was uniquely capable of such reflection and that our status as *imago Dei* enabled humanity to achieve some measure of sovereignty over nature. Although the reverberations took centuries, the nominalist revolution provoked Christians of various quarters to begin to look to the natural world as a means to knowledge of God, as a means to self-knowledge, and as a mechanism for social transformation. Pelagianism snuck back into theological consideration where the religious impulse sought a distant and unknowable God: “To be modern is to be self-liberating and self-making, and thus not merely to be in a history or tradition but to make history. To be modern consequently means not merely to define one’s being in terms of time but also to define time in terms of one’s being, to

understand time as the product of human freedom in interaction with the natural world."⁴⁶ In this sense the rise of nominalism and its subsequent impact on theological tradition gave birth to a new conceptual geography for *homo viator*. Christian thinkers in antiquity and the early Middle Ages had mapped the journey of life in metaphysical terms. The human being was, in their view, a spiritual being in the material world and thus soteriologically predisposed to return to God in an ascent from matter to spirit. The theological tumult of the Middle Ages generated a less abstract topography for Christian salvation: the material world itself became a soteriological landscape in which believers endeavored to read and understand God's presence in the actions of nature.

RECOVERING THE PERIPATETIC TRADITION

As the terrain through which *homo viator* moved became less metaphorical, the role of bodily practices took on new soteriological significance. Walking has a long history as a vehicle for moral reflection and self-cultivation, and its functions in these regards help account for the growth of outdoor recreation practices during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The connection between walking and thinking is especially associated with Aristotle, whose school was dubbed Peripatetic given his propensity to walk around the Lyceum as he taught. In one sense the peripatetic tradition was resuscitated when medieval Islamic and Christian theologians rediscovered Aristotelian texts characterized by a restless self-searching. The peripatetic tradition, however, is more than a designation of a philosophical school—it also denotes a method, an embodied practice of thinking and reflection. The nominalist turn away from universals meant that Renaissance and early modern thinkers became much more attendant to empirically observable physical processes than had their medieval predecessors, and this attentiveness suggests a (renewed) willingness to think and learn outside the confines of textual tradition. As natural history became a significant branch of learning in the early modern era, the

countryside wanderings of European literati became a crucial source of both philosophical introspection and scientific analysis.

The place of walking as one of modernity's primary contemplative techniques has been a tertiary question for most cultural historians, who have generally been more concerned with economic and material conditions. Walking is sometimes dismissed as a pedestrian practice, as a plodding concern with the ordinary and the everyday, and it is this conceptual association that may explain the degree to which the cultural significance of walking has been overlooked.⁴⁷ However neglected, walking—as a form of recreation, as a way to think, and as an object of literary interest—has long served to underscore visions of human life as a journey. The metaphor of life as travel is concretely realized in literary accounts of travel by foot. Critics have amply demonstrated the relationship of romantic poetry with respect to other *homo viator* traditions, but the metaphor of life as a journey by foot can be applied much more broadly to medieval pilgrimage accounts, to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and to naturalistic works like Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* or John Muir's *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*.⁴⁸ Even the very origins of modern thought cannot be separated from the act of walking: Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Bentham, Mill, and many other philosophical luminaries considered walking integral to their thinking.⁴⁹ If the practice of walking is indeed so deeply embedded in the fabric of Western modernity, how did it come to be invested with spiritual significance? And what is the relationship between walking as a spiritual practice and Euro-American ideas about the natural world?

Medieval Europe would not have been a particularly safe place to walk: wild animals, lawless forests, and poor roads posed real obstacles for travelers. An even more significant check on perambulatory pursuits was the medieval imagination, which associated the wilderness beyond the city walls with both mortal and moral threats.⁵⁰ Religious practices that ritualized walking were, however, common throughout the Middle Ages. Pilgrimages, like those to the Holy City of Jerusalem or along the Camino de Santiago Compostela, have been important to

Christian practice since late antiquity. In the Middle Ages, however, the peripatetic practices of pilgrims and mendicants were often marginalized as being tinged with paganism or labeled as otherwise subversive. Unlike the later outdoor wanderings of the romantics, medieval pilgrimages were also often carefully managed and hierarchically organized. Thus, while walking has been a long-standing conduit for spirituality in Christian cultures, it was not until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when intellectual movements like humanism and empiricism were coupled with social and agricultural improvements, that the conditions were right for walking to become an instrument of scientific curiosity and unscripted moral reflection. Petrarch's desire to take in the view from a mountain summit had been a harbinger of what was to come in the following centuries.

Walking took on profound new spiritual and philosophical ramifications as it was disassociated from the pursuit of fixed goals and given over to, as Thoreau put it, "sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all worldly engagements."⁵¹ Walking became a worldly practice with otherworldly implications. As a modality of modern spirituality, the connection between thinking and walking grows from the belief that the free association of thought is a precondition for genuine contemplation. Petrarch's letter recalls a moment when he "transferred my winged thoughts from things corporeal to the immaterial . . . [and] these thoughts stimulated both body and mind in a wonderful degree."⁵² Rousseau similarly enjoyed walking because it allowed him to let his "mind wander quite freely and [his] ideas [to] follow their own course uninhibited and untroubled."⁵³

The basic function of walking—to provide a space for self-cultivation—was articulated nowhere more clearly than in British romanticism, whose champions claimed that "as a deliberate mode of travel, walking accomplishes material and metaphorical educations, explorations of world and self that can be regarded as cultivation of both the individual and his society."⁵⁴ Romantics crystallized the idea that recreational walking is imbued with soteriological qualities, and over

the course of the nineteenth century this view became commonplace in Western societies, particularly in Anglophone cultures. As Szasz puts it, “by the early nineteenth century this natural religion—seeing the hand of the creator in the woods, rivers, animals, plants, and mountains—had almost merged with the idea of Revelation.”⁵⁵ The romantic emphasis on movement as thinking sought the reconciliation of “past and present, body and earth, life and death.”⁵⁶

The narrated walk became a central romantic motif, providing writers with a mechanism to capture not only their physical movement through the landscape but also the syncopation of this movement with inward transformation—with the shifting terrain of mentalities, emotions, and beliefs. By the nineteenth century, celebrations of walking argued that “the natural, primitive quality of the physical act of walking restores the natural proportions of our perceptions, reconnecting us with both the physical world and the moral order inherent in it.”⁵⁷ This commitment to peripatetic movement portrays “walking as a making of the self, emphasizing that laboriously creative sense of ‘recreation.’”⁵⁸ In the nineteenth century, socially engaged intellectuals like William Morris and John Ruskin championed the potential of walking as a mechanism of social reform and as an important medical technology. Ruskin even claimed his walking tour of the Alps had cured him of lifelong health problems, including tuberculosis.⁵⁹ By the twilight of the century, the mentally restorative, bodily healthful, and spiritually redemptive powers of walking achieved near ubiquitous acceptance.⁶⁰ Literary accounts from this era present the transformative power of walking as its inevitable result, which occludes the fact that its powers were very much culturally generated expectations about what the action of recreational walking does to persons. Advocates of walking as spiritual recreation claim that peripatetic movement harmonizes individuals with the landscape through which they move and, more dramatically, that walking carries individuals both into the future and into the past. Thoreau’s famous essay “Walking” describes this latter element as a personal form of participation in the westward historical movement

that is modern progress.⁶¹ And, at the very same time, this progress is grounded by a realization of the history of the human race. For Thoreau the urge to walk signals our most basic nature as aspiring, mobile creatures. Becoming a walker, then, puts people in the position to harness the entire history of humanity for the purpose of self-cultivation. Rousseau would have concurred.

If walking is a kind of movement that restores individuals, even temporarily, to a more natural state of existence and is conducive for moral growth, then it should come as no surprise that this kind of recreation is densely entangled with vernacular Christian praxis. The various strains of “muscular” Christianity that flourished in Anglophone Christian societies during the nineteenth century formulated explicitly Christian recreational pursuits aimed at self-cultivation. Christian leaders had struggled with the very same problematic of pleasure that troubled Augustine. Echoing his repudiation of the theater and other idle amusements, Victorian evangelicals like William Wilberforce and Charles Kingsley argued that the vices of urban life were a direct affront to Christian morality and threatened to deprave those who sought out such profane pleasures. Idle pastimes, including gambling, drinking, and spectator sports, were objectionable to these revivalists on the grounds that they prevented personal spiritual development. Victorian Christians demanded a restoration of wholesome pastimes but were distinguished in their efforts from previous generations by a direct confrontation of the theological problem posed by bodily recreation. Rather than repudiate sports and other physical activities, as had Augustine and the church fathers, nineteenth-century religious leaders took a new tack: fashioning a culture of recreation designed to bend sporting life to the moral project of Christianity.⁶²

This move came to be known as muscular Christianity, a label that designates a range of ideas, practices, and organizations that aimed to “get religion out of the pale of the chapel into the fresh air of heaven and to give it full exercise in that world which it came to beautify and animate.”⁶³ Protestant leaders were eager to reform bodies and minds in

accord with what they perceived as the inherent order of nature, an order that turned on the proper relation of the sexes. The nineteenth century saw a turn away from spiritual practices that were perceived as overly feminine: piety, quietude, domestic forms of contemplation. Under the banner of muscular Christianity, a new emphasis on the cultivation of moral virtue through bodily rigor emerged in their place. Such practices grew directly from the romantic claim that natural beauty facilitated “imputations of grace” and that “aesthetic experiences ... encountered in nature ... could act as spontaneous triggers of virtue.”⁶⁴ If, as the Victorian natural theologians claimed, God’s handiwork was manifest in every aspect of creation, then the proper enjoyment of nature was certainly morally beneficial. The founding figures of muscular Christianity (e.g., Charles Kingsley, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Hughes) acknowledged this debt, particularly to the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge’s romanticism sought to demonstrate the moral benefits of nature without straying as far from Christian orthodoxy as had the German romantics. His *Aids to Reflection* posed “the question of how far Christianity could exploit moral sources beyond itself, the sources of godliness that lay beyond explicitly religious activities.”⁶⁵

Drawing on one of the most basic elements of romantic thought, many British and American Christians in the nineteenth century felt (perhaps even more than they thought) that the order and reason apparent in the natural world acted as a positive influence on the moral disposition of individuals. Exposure to the workings of nature was believed to be inherently beneficial. This sentiment can be found throughout the corpus of romantic and idealist philosophy: in Rousseau, whose pedagogical work *Emile* extols the virtue of learning by exposure to nature; in Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* locates natural sublimity as the bridge between the actuality of the social world and its potential for perfection inherent in reason; and, of course, in Emerson, whose essay “Nature” claimed this idea as the foundational aspiration of the American psyche.

Enthusiasm for walking emerged as a result of the conjunction of romantic philosophy and a unique strain of Christian enthusiasm for

worldly engagement and bodily recreation. Such enthusiasm was only able to flourish, however, under the social conditions produced by the industrial revolution.⁶⁶ Peripatetic texts and practices gained prominence in response to the social pressures generated by tremendous changes in agriculture and transportation.⁶⁷ During the eighteenth century, agricultural developments like enclosure and colonial trade regimes effectively displaced many rural farmers and sped the processes of industrialization. By the nineteenth century these revolutionary changes had fomented a nostalgic relationship to agricultural production: British and American working-class populations were increasingly urban and the landowning classes had drifted considerably from their rural traditions. Various forms of outdoor recreation grew in popularity as means to reconnect people with pastoral pastimes, though these traditions were invented as much as remembered.⁶⁸ New technologies of transport reordered the human capacity for movement, and the invention of steam power had a curious dual effect on the nascent cult of walking.

On the one hand locomotion seemed to many an unnatural mode of transport that dislocated the human body in time and space, severing it from its inborn capacity for sustained travel at speeds no greater than a few miles an hour. For such critics walking provided an appropriate antidote. On the other hand steam engines greatly increased the mobility of the middle classes on land, as well as sea, enabling enhanced access to well-preserved landscapes. The effect of locomotion on the outdoor recreation movement was explosive. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century the sporting vacation became an increasingly important leisure activity. More subtly, the twin engines driving the growth of the sporting holiday—anti-industrialism and leisure travel—suggest the ambivalent approach to nature now typical in Western societies. Time spent walking in pristine environments is understood as a necessary counterbalance to the stresses of urban life, but such experiences are achieved in and through the very same processes of industrialization that they are designed to escape.⁶⁹ The popularization of walking tours in England and the United States in the early and middle

decades of the nineteenth century demonstrates this marriage of primitivism and industrialism, which now structures so much of the Euro-American relationship with the natural world. Technological mastery is clothed in an aura of ecological attunement, a relationship evident in myriad recreational pursuits, like car camping, scuba diving, and oxygenated mountaineering.

Outdoor recreation became the most prominent remedy for the harms of industrialization and became much more than a pursuit of truth and natural beauty by individual romantic thinkers and writers. Social reformers of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era took up recreation—especially walking and hiking—as a vital element of a healthy, moral society: “recreations that were perceived as character building were promoted as one means to the improvement of the working classes, in pursuit of the larger goal of a stabilization of the social order.”⁷⁰ As a recreational pursuit, walking (as well as its sporting cousins: cycling, hunting, and bird-watching) has sometimes been enjoyed by individuals and sometimes by groups. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, fraternal organizations devoted to walking sprouted in cities across the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Although these clubs variously conceived of themselves as devoted to rambling, walking, hiking trails, or mountaineering, they all drank from the same elixir of peripatetic cultivation and, with few exceptions, tended toward a vaguely Christian strain of romanticism.

Again, despite its instrumentalization as a means to spiritual liberation and social renewal, walking fades into the cultural background of cultural noise. Although it is a nearly universal human activity, the past three centuries have seen a resuscitation of peripatetic practices, the deployment of walking as self-cultivation. In fact, the cult of walking can quickly be identified in the pages of many popular magazines and self-help books that promise health, happiness, and wholeness to those who take up its one ritual. But the modern cult of walking is quite different from the pacing philosophers of the Lyceum because it lays claim to a kind of imaginative time travel. Walking provides a break from the

precise schedules of urban industrial life, returning walkers to their natural thoughts. More important, as it enacts a romantic idea of human being, walking is taken as an activity that temporarily restores our Edenic status. As British historian Anne Wallace writes:

We see walkers not only re-creating themselves but going back in time—and to what an astonishing temporal location! They return simultaneously to a world filled with the green of wild vegetation, to “this nation’s infancy” when “basic pioneer virtues”—not just “self-reliance and simplicity” but communiality and generosity too—were the norm, and to a time somehow also like the middle ages (we assume in piety)... Descriptions like this assert ... [that] anyone who goes walking ... will reconnect with his own past and his nation’s past, indeed with the human race’s past as he imagines and longs for it.⁷¹

As modern societies drift further from Christian hegemony, the vision of Eden is increasingly laced with secular, ecological embellishments, yet pedestrian movement through undeveloped landscapes continues to act as an imaginative exercise in which the walker becomes his or her most primordial self, a bipedal ape aligned with the workings of nature.

CHRISTIANITY’S RECREATIONAL LEGACY

Could there be anything more secular than the vanity that is the modern American obsession with exercise? The complicated status of the human body in Christian thought—at once the source of our depravity and the object of the crucifixion—certainly seems to establish a tension between piety and physicality. Augustine’s disdain for the spectacle of gladiatorial combat and his concern about the limits of human sexuality initiated a theological distinction between religion and irreligion that was as much a metaphysical distinction between the worldly and the otherworldly as it was an antinomy between the embodied and the disembodied. Among Augustine’s many contributions to the history of Christianity was his mandate that contemplation worthy of God is to be intellectual and inwardly focused. The perspective that attentiveness to

matters of the soul and to pleasures of the body are mutually exclusive can be found throughout the history of Christianity. Antagonistic ideas about recreation were characteristic of American religious attitudes even at the same time that European romantics were articulating a new Christian vision of bodily movement.⁷² Although the eternal soul was to be the lone object of salvific concern, the twists and turns of history made it possible for pleasurable bodily practices to take on soteriological potential.⁷³ The development of modern recreational pursuits as a means for making and remaking the self and as a means of seeking proper relations between persons and the natural order were unlikely historical turns, but these changes were generated by questions very much within the corpus of Christian theological tradition.

From Augustine's time there were active debates among Christian intellectuals about the ontological status of the created world. The popularity of Neoplatonism and Manichaeism throughout the Mediterranean region imbued early Christianity with a strong dualistic tendency that dismissed nature as distant from the source of being. Despite his involvement with Manichaeism, Augustine, like many of his contemporaries, worked to attenuate excessive ontological dualism. Centuries later, such moderation would give way to more robustly positive valuations of the natural world: late medieval figures like Eckhart and Petrarch explicitly celebrate the wonders of creation, as did a host of others not treated in this episodic history (Bonaventure, St. Francis of Assisi, et al.).⁷⁴ Conventional historical narratives "associate indifference to all the beauties of nature with medieval Christianity ... but this is doubtless an error ... [for] among the early Christians there had been some appreciation of nature."⁷⁵ Late medieval and early modern thinkers became increasingly affirmative in their appraisal of nature and even began to assert that knowledge about the order of nature offered human beings unprecedented new power. This assertion of confidence in the possibility of human progress is the foundation of modernity.

Such cultural assurance altered the terrain through which *homo viator* traveled; as this landscape became more terrestrial than metaphysical,

life's journey toward salvation became self-actualized. Romanticism was an especially important transformative force. The concept of grace had long stood at the center of Christian thinking about soteriology, guarding against Pelagian heresy. Redemption from sin required God's impetus, and, understood metaphysically, the mechanics of his grace operated directly on the human soul. For Augustine grace flowed directly from God to the individual, affecting one's innermost being. The *Confessions* describes Augustine's conversion, the moment when he most directly experienced God's grace, as a psychic reception: having been called by the voice of a child to "pick it up, read it," he opened to a passage from the book of Romans and "instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty" (8.29). John Wesley's conversion experience is also purely an act of reception, his "heart strangely warmed" from without.⁷⁶ The romantics shared such notions of inward transformation but were moved by the wonder and beauty of Creation. Grace, in the wake of the theological ruptures of nominalism and romanticism, was to be looked for in the living world rather than anticipated in some personal communiqué from God.

The salvific possibilities opened by the idea that God's grace was to be actively pursued in the natural world ushered in a new era of outdoor enthusiasm, which accounts in part for the rise of natural history, the idea of parklands protection, and the popularity of physical recreation. Engagements with nature aimed at social and personal improvement are consummately modern phenomena, especially the forms of recreation that developed in response to anxieties about urbanization and industrialization. As the quest to benefit from the spiritually liberatory powers of nature entered the twentieth century, it began to take shape in forms that are easily recognizable as the foundations of the American environmental movement. In the following chapter I will look more closely at the rise of conservation-oriented recreational associations as expressions of uniquely twentieth-century environmental mentalities.