

Theological and Ecological ethics

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Introduction

Ethical reflections in the context of ecological concerns and climate change, give Christian theology an opportunity to think about how our traditions apply to the earth and its habitat. I will argue that the tradition of natural law is too ambiguous for the task, but hold to the notion of living within the natural order. I will suggest that dominion as granted to humankind in Genesis 1 needs to be read in the context of the first eleven chapters up to Noah. The post Noah flood covenant between God and the earth, reframed in a new covenant in the suffering Christ offers a role of caring for a continuing creation. A role is not an ethic - we need to craft the love ethic to include the earth, and with the knowledge of science, live sustainably within our natural limits. Leopold believed that Ezekiel and Isaiah saw the despoiling of the land was wrong, and he formulated a land ethic. I shall look at a recent revision of that and consider how the sustainability principle requires an ethical shift from our dominant economic worldview. Biblical insights about what is eternal and everlasting can inform a long-term worldview, and our commitments to future generations.

The nature culture difference

Mike Hulme, the Founding Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in the UK, in a lecture to the Faraday Institute, used a metaphor of “Lamenting Eden” as one way of looking at climate change.¹ So Genesis 2:23 “Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.” The pristine garden is lost and we yearn for its restoration.²

Nature in this metaphor is something pure, pristine, beyond the reach of humans, fragile, something to protect, to save. This is a romantic wilderness, yearning for restoration. It raises the question “what is natural?” He believes that the concept of nature as distinct from culture comes from the enlightenment. In traditional or non-Western cultures, nature and culture are consistently embedded together. There is no nature uninterpreted by culture; no culture disembodied from nature. Wilderness or nature does not exist as a separate category. His view here is that nature is not separate from culture – culture here including technology – and climate change began with the domestication of fire. Our climate, unlike biodiversity or ozone, is not lost; we are only rearranging it. We are getting new types. There is no such thing as a good or bad climate, only good or bad ways of living with climate.

So the first question is whether nature can be separated from culture, and the second depends on the answer to the first, of whether nature (or climate) is good or bad.

Now I believe Hulme is right in questioning whether we can preserve nature. Nature, or natural processes or a natural order, though, can be distinguished from culture.

When we talk about natural events, we think of those non-human phenomena in which human control is minimal or non-existent. The volcanic eruptions in 186AD and before that formed the caldera, now the basin for Lake Taupo, is a good example. So we refer to natural forces, where human culture has no or little influence. When a person approaches death, and medical technology becomes pointless, we say that we will let nature take its course. Medicine is a great manipulator and controller of nature, a prime case for the ascendancy of culture. Yet there are still natural limits within which our culture is constrained. While these boundaries are stretched by science and technology, health is still a process of fitness, of

¹ Mike Hulme, Three Meanings of Climate Change: presaging Apocalypse, constructing Babel, lamenting Eden, 30 Oct 2007. <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Seminars.php>

² Compare “Expelled from Eden, human beings have had to struggle against thorns and thistles, and to till a now unsubmitive soil. Nature therefore had to be beaten into shape to serve human purposes” from John Hadgood, “The Concept of Nature” Darton Longman Todd, 2002 p60 He argues against the conquest of nature, but in my view does not acknowledge sufficiently the natural limits we need to live within.

living within biological and ecological dynamics.

The term nature then is ambiguous. It may refer to what is not human (that aspect of nature which is not cultural) or it may refer to one side of that mix of nature and culture (that aspect of nature where humans are part of the system).

Natural law

The tradition in Christian Thought describe ethical laws or natural law as formula or doctrines seems to work on the analogy to the laws of nature. So, for example, Michael Northcott:³

The natural order...reflects the wisdom, goodness and the ordering hand of God. Nature is characterised by purposive order and equilibrium which has a deep moral, social and spiritual significance...Humans are part of the natural created order. The natural and social order are not opposed: they are both aspects of creation”

Northcott speaks of a preserving the natural order, and from that derives an ethic: “That which is moral in human life is that which tends to preserve the harmony of the natural world and to follow the wisdom of natural systems...Respect for natural order...involves respect for all living beings with which we share the earth.”⁴

Northcott's use of nature is ambiguous. He concedes that the natural law tradition needs an ecological revision.⁵ In so doing, the basic concept of natural law is compromised as being inadequate. Equally the flaw is that much human behaviour is as much cultural as natural, or at least culturally conditioned.⁶ Therefore to identify an ethic on what is natural cannot work because cultural factors operate that are not determined by the notion of what is natural.

Any attempt to set up ethical rules based on a distinction between natural and unnatural is equally flawed. Much of what medicine does is unnatural. Opponents of contraception might say it is unnatural to inhibit our reproductive activities, but when a population grows beyond its resources of food, natural processes like starvation kick in. We then need to make some ethical considerations using other criteria.

Living within the natural order is different from natural law

So while acknowledging that nature and culture are on a continuum, even so there are natural limits to our culture and technology. These limits may be stretched, but nevertheless there is a natural order that we must live within. To have good health is to live within those natural limits – poor food, unsafe technology, polluted water and the like is where nature is degraded with adverse health outcomes. So a wise culture will recognise and live within the natural order of things, while at the same time developing culture for human life. We are part of nature, and at the same time we develop cultures so human societies can extend beyond the limitations of simple animal life. We invent artefacts, technologies, we modify landscapes, channel and store water. All of these are created by human ingenuity using the resources of nature.

Dominion

Lynn White, in a much discussed paper, claimed that the dominion found in the first creation account gives an exploitative outlook and the power to subdue other creatures, which has engendered the ecological crisis.⁷ Peacocke, while denying the text justifies this, acknowledges that it is likely that this view at

³ The Environment and Christian Ethics, CUP, 1996. p165-6, 196

⁴ p196-7

⁵ p267, 312-3. On page 246 he quotes Paul and Aquinas that we need grace and the Holy Spirit as well as nature. To employ supernature is to concede that natural law is insufficient.

⁶ “Suppose that anyone asserts that men possess natural rights or are bound by natural laws: invite him, then to make a list of such rights or laws. It is notorious that adherents of such theories offer lists that differ in substance to each other.” Alasdair MacIntyre: “A Short history of Ethics”, Collier Macmillan, 1966 p233

⁷ Recently reprinted in Robin Gill, “A Textbook of Christian Ethics” 3rd Ed, T&T Clark, 2006.p303

various times may have been held by a majority of Christians.⁸ He argued that dominion is exercised with a responsibility to God and to be informed by love.⁹ ¹⁰ As we continue reading the first eleven chapters, the two creation accounts are followed by a massive flood. We might say that man's place in the order of things was rethought via this extreme weather event. The story tells us that God was sorry that he had made humankind because of its violence and wickedness, and he set about to destroy it. It was the righteous Noah with whom God made a covenant, although the covenant was between God and the earth.¹¹ Noah was given a blessing to be fruitful and multiply, but there is no reference to dominate or subdue.¹² Genesis 9:2 states that a fear and dread shall rest upon every animal of the earth, including birds, every creeping thing, and fish. The original order of the creation 1 story was modified, with mixed blessings for animals.¹³ We may take from this that not only did God attribute moral value to the whole of creation, but that there was a changing and continuing creating relationship between God and the creation, in which the dominion and subjugation of Genesis 1 is revisited.

We may draw the following theological picture. The account is still anthropocentric, (human centred) but that fear and dread of mankind to the animals has come about due to a lost relationship (sin). A right relationship with inorganic and organic nature will come when man's relationship with God is renewed (through Christ) because mankind will have a renewed order with the cosmos. The primary New Testament command is the love ethic – (love God, love neighbour, love yourself).¹⁴ Human interests are still above the interests or worth of non-human, or perceived only after or in consequence of human interests.¹⁵

How can humanity gain this cosmic perspective of the new order other than by an additional ethical or other principle? The love ethic will only go so far in addressing the need to give greater weight to non-human nature or to give weight to global needs over and against individual ones. One example of this might be that only in a non-Christian country like China, would a population control ethic take precedence over individual rights.

Respect for nature

Respect for nature or reverence for life come up against similar difficulties. The challenge for such principles is that when we assign moral value to non-human nature, we need to deal with the problem of evil, in particular, natural evil¹⁶. An event might be said to be natural evil when loss of life or pain or suffering occurs through (non-human) natural means to human life or to non-human life. So if a person or creature is burned by volcanic lava or drowned by a wave caused by a tsunami, or dies from an infectious virus, and pain or suffering and/or loss of life occurs that is of no instrumental value, we can say this is a natural evil. I do not respect nor revere the mosquito that brings malaria, or the super bug that eats muscle tissue, or the deadly brain tumour to a teenager.

⁸ Both Aquinas and Luther follow Augustine in isolating intelligence as the distinctive feature that differentiates humans from other animals and that reflects the image of God. Aquinas holds the view of an anthropocentrism in the stronger form: that animals lacking intellect, are in the world only to serve human beings. Neither Augustine nor Luther hold this view. From Robin Gill, "A Textbook of Christian Ethics" 3rd Ed, T&T Clark, 2006.

Karl Barth: "Lordship can have the primary meaning of requisitioning, disciplining, taming, harnessing, exploiting and making profitable use of the surplus forces of nature in the animal world. This is obviously the primary meaning when it says in Gen 1:26-8, that man is to have dominion..." Church Dogmatics, Volume three, part 4, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1961, p351

⁹ Man and Nature p155f

¹⁰ "At the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross and its relation to enmity and power, servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility." John Howard Yoder "The Politics of Jesus" Eerdmans, 1994, p131

¹¹ Genesis 9:13

¹² Anne Gardner: "Ecojustice: A study of Genesis 6, 11-13" in "The Earth Story in Genesis" Ed Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst, Sheffield Academic Press 2000.

¹³ John Olley: "Mixed blessings for animals: The contrasts of Genesis 9" in "The Earth Story in Genesis" Ed Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst, Sheffield Academic Press 2000.

¹⁴ Mark 12:28-34

¹⁵ Spenser and White in "Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living" SPCK 2007, extend the notion of neighbour to include non-human life. P86

¹⁶ Augustine's freewill defence does not apply.

In the evolutionary scheme of things, this is part of life, but to a particular person, it is not a good thing. The creation then is a mix of good and bad, even if it is my hope that in the future good will outweigh bad.

One way through this is to respect nature for its beauty and health, and to not respect pathological nature, especially when it is of no value, such as in pointless suffering.

Anthropocentrism

We humans have dominion and we need to exercise it for good. The dominance of the human species over other life, both plant and animal, provides a hierarchy. We can include the respect and care to all of life in our ethic by our responsible discrimination and how we use our power. Dominion, like our intelligence and our technology, needs to serve a wider ethic – it is a means not an end.

Part of that exercise is to acquire and use knowledge of the natural order and the limits it imposes on us, and to derive and craft ethical systems.¹⁷ Science and technology then have an ethical purpose for understanding nature in its fullest sense, not to be limited to pursuing knowledge for economic (or indeed military) goals of producing more commodities or consumerables.

The moral worth of creation

We have already noted that the category of nature as a separate entity probably comes from the enlightenment. Certainly it is not found in the bible, the nearest approach to an all embracing word for their environment was “the earth”. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. (Psalm 24:1) Friends of the earth they would understand. Nature lover they would struggle with.¹⁸ I am going to use creation and nature as approximately equivalent, while recognising the difference that creation has a creator.

In Genesis 1 what is created is of moral value. The creation is not creation out of nothing, that is a later doctrine, but to the order that is given the formless void, and the light, vegetation, the living creatures and human kind, “God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good.”¹⁹

Hulme's claim that there is no such thing as a good or bad climate is very anthropocentric. Nature for him is only good or bad in relation to human life. However the first creation account attributes moral value to the whole of creation, not just humankind. In that sense the cosmos has its own value, an intrinsic worth independent of human utility.

The ethical task

Theologians often see their task as enunciating a doctrine (“doctrine is ethics”^{20 21}) or a role (we must be stewards, trustees or managers²² or priests²³, companions²⁴ or co-workers with God). Assigning a role is not an ethic- a steward may be moral or immoral, a priest good or bad. To equate ethics with doctrine has two problems. The doctrine may be good or bad or simply inadequate in this context. And how does one know what doctrine to employ? In the history of Christendom, the Bible has been used by both sides of the moral divide – for and against slavery, in the role and place of women, whether to worship on the Sabbath or on Sunday, and whether and in what circumstances war is justified.²⁵ An appeal to follow God's

¹⁷ John Harrod's: “Weaving the Tapestry of Moral Judgment – Christian Ethics in a Plural World, Epworth 2007, outlines a method for devising ethics weaving theological and secular ethics.

¹⁸ John Austin Baker: Biblical attitudes to Nature, p87 in *Man and Nature*, Edited Hugh Montefiore, Collins 1975.

¹⁹ Genesis 1:31

²⁰ Chapter 12 in *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics*, edited by Alan Torrance and Michael Banner, T&T Clark, 2006.

²¹ Harrod acknowledges that theocentricism of itself does not help us with the hard questions in sorting out the tension between human need and the claim of the earth and other forms of life. It will not assist us in sorting out trade offs or lead to an ecological rulebook. In that regard theocentricism is not an ethic.

²² Peacocke, *Man and Nature* p 158

²³ <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles2/MetJohnCreation.php>

²⁴ Ruth Page, “God and the web of creation” SCM 1996, p154

²⁵ Willard M Swartley: “Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women” Herald Press 1983.

John M G Barclay: “Am I not a Man and a Brother? The Bible and the British Anti-Slavery Campaign” *Expository Times*, Vol 119 no

commands or to the Bible results in vague generalities or ambiguity, or when it comes to specifics, is used by both sides.²⁶ An argument leading to a common mind by persuasion is lacking or relies on an external moral viewpoint.

For Jamieson “fundamental questions of morality... concern how we live, what kind of societies we want, and how we should relate to nature and other forms of life...A system of values ...specifies permissions, norms, duties, and obligations; it assigns blame, praise, and responsibility, and it provides an account of what is valuable and what is not. A system of values provides a standard for assessing our behaviour and that of others. Perhaps indirectly, it also provides a measure of the acceptability of government action and regulation.”²⁷ A worldview is not an ethic, but may lead to one. If we have a set of principles we need some way of recognising urgency and priority and developing a nested hierarchy. Ethical ideals, frameworks or principles, often abstract in form, need applying to contexts and situations in real life. Stories, fables or parables can provide such connections (recognising we select and interpret them).

Leopold’s land ethic revised

Leopold argued that the ethic, as seen in the Mosaic Decalogue and later the golden rule, is between individuals and neighbour. Yet there is no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and the animals and plants growing on it. He saw Ezekiel and Isaiah asserting that despoliation of the land was wrong. “A land ethic reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise”²⁸

When I first read Leopold over 30 years ago, my hesitations were around defining the biotic community and how this rule could be applied. Now with climate change, we have an issue that is measurable. We know the trends and can set measurable targets for reducing GHG emissions. The ethic can be applied as an overall goal for the health of the biosphere.

For the Quaker authors of: *Right Relationship* “²⁹...compassion, mutual aid, community service, human well-being, and respect for life provide the basis for people of *all* cultural and religious traditions to lead a life respectful of the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the entire commonwealth of life. The commonwealth of life respects that a right relationship requires a fair basis for distributing the economy’s benefits and burdens. The concept of resilience and its many well-examined examples in the real world also demonstrates that ecosystems have self-organizational properties of their own—and are not, therefore, reducible to their component parts. This reformulates Leopold’s idea of integrity: A system is healthy when its integrity is resilient.”³⁰

1 p3-14, 2007

Richard A Burrige: “Imitating Jesus – an inclusive approach to New Testament Ethics”, Eerdmans 2007, deals with how apartheid was justified as a biblical doctrine. His conclusion that the Bible must be read by an open inclusive community of followers will not take us far for an ecological ethic.

²⁶ “We have not thought it right to try to derive any such general principles for the theological insights we have discussed. As these few examples themselves indicate, either such principles have to be so general as to be quite ambiguous and therefore vacuous, or else they become so specific that they cannot be claimed to be the only possible Christian approach in every possible practical situation”.
Man and Nature p81.

²⁷ Jamieson, Dale Ethics, *Public Policy and Global Warming*, Pages 371-379 in *Environmental Ethics*, Ed Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, Blackwell, 2003

²⁸ Leopold, Aldo “A Sand County Almanac” Sierra Club Ballantine 1970, p 238-9, 258, 262

²⁹ Peter G. Brown, et al “Right Relationship - Building a Whole Earth Economy” Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2009. p33, 86, 44,

³⁰ From Peter Brown: Replacing the term “stability” with “resilience” reflects more current understandings while remaining true to Leopold’s merging of scientific knowledge with ethical traditions. With only a slight alteration, Leopold’s statement applies with equal cogency to the domain of human relationships. Thus: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the *human community*. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” The “integrity, resilience, and beauty of the biotic community” is characterized by ecological coherence. The “integrity, resilience, and beauty of the human community” is characterized by social equity. These two statements encompass concern with ecological coherence and moral integrity, and, together, function as a practical guide with regard to the creation of a moral economy. They can be combined in the statement: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the *commonwealth of life*. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

A “right relationship provides a guiding ethic for people wishing to lead fulfilling lives as creative and integrated participants in human society and the commonwealth of life as a whole. It is akin to what some would call “sustainability,” though it goes much deeper. Right relationship offers a guidance system for functioning in harmony with scientific reality and enduring ethical traditions.”³¹

Sustainability and religious narratives

Jamieson, in a critical review of the notion of sustainability, believes that while we are clear about what is not sustainable, it is most powerful when used in highly contextualised concrete cases. Sustainable Development proposed by the ICUN ³² is compromised by two competing drivers.³³ Development needs an economic framework, and unless it is subservient to ethical and biological demands, the economic driver will undermine sustainability. The NZ Landcare scenarios define these two views of sustainability as:³⁴

- The critical limits view is concerned with Earth’s carrying capacity and resource limitations and the need to preserve natural assets to provide ecological functions and services that the human population relies on for survival. (strong)
- The competing objectives view is focussed on balancing social, economic and ecological goals and aims to meet a broad range of human needs, including health, literacy and political freedom as well as a healthy natural environment and other purely material needs. (weak)

Sustainability occurs when development does not erode, but rather maintains or restores or enhances environmental, economic, social, cultural institutional and human capital.³⁵

Jamieson sees the need for an ethical shift. The moral reorientation that is required, involves new relationships between humans as well as with other animals and the rest of nature. We need a discourse that permits deeper discussion of aesthetic, spiritual, religious, cultural, political and moral values.” In part that requires vision and stories in creating a future in our lives.³⁶

There is a place for science and a domain of the arts and religion. When we ask: “What is it we want our children to inherit?” I suggest that we are inviting an ethical judgement that while based on science, goes beyond scientific indicators. Consider a psalm and two parables.

In this legacy to my children, I am looking in that inheritance to that which is lasting and eternal. It is not, as the psalmist put it “like the grass that is renewed in the morning, but in the evening it fades and withers” (Psalm 90:5). Tim Flannery suggests sustainability is essentially about extending the eighth commandment - you shall not steal - to future generations.³⁷

The second is I want my children to grow their gifts. Like the parable of the sower, if the seed falls on rocky, hostile, or infertile ground, it will never grow. The seed needs a fertile soil in which to grow. (Matthew 13:3-9) For our children to flourish, we should not bequeath to them an impoverished and declining civilisation.

And I want to try and leave the world in a better state. When we are leased a vineyard, we are tenants who have the task of producing fruit. And if we cannot, because of theft or greed, the parable of the wicked tenants states that it should be given to those who can. (Matthew 21:33-41)

Now these values of our religious tradition can inform the notion of sustainability:

³¹ p4

³² “How to save the world – strategy for World Conservation” Robert Allen, Kogan Page, 1980.

³³ See John Cobb Jr, “Toward a Just and Sustainable Economic Order, Chapter 26 in “Environmental Ethics, An anthology” Ed Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, Blackwell 2003.

³⁴ “Four Future Scenarios for New Zealand: work in progress” developed by the Landcare Research Scenarios Working Group, 2nd Edition, Manaaki Whenua Press 2007. p79

³⁵ Four Futures, p 82.

³⁶ Dale Jamieson, *Morality’s progress*, OUP 2002 chapter 21, p321-2, 333-4.

³⁷ Tim Flannery, “Now or never, A sustainable future for Australia?” <http://www.quarterlyessay.com/qe/pastissues/index.php>, p61

- seek what is lasting and eternal,
- do not steal from future generations,
- care for the good soil to plant and grow our and our grandchildren's gifts, and
- act as tenants who leave the world in a better state.

The love ethic can be extended to love God, neighbour, self, and planet – the whole of God's creation. A loving God is creator, redeemer, and sustainer. In this set we can gather other principles like justice, and caring for the earth and its habitats and inhabitants.

To avoid the difficulties of moral pluralism we need a dominant concept, which has priority in deciding what principles relate to what contexts and how we resolve conflicting obligations. We may need the ability to tolerate some moral diversity, provided the dominant principles are achieved. It is the question of how we deal with trade offs.³⁸

Another question is where we locate the priority of moral value. Does an individual human right have precedence of the survival of the community or an ecosystem? Particularly when global interests may not be in my interests. How is the goal of survival of the species, (or the protection of Gaia, or the well being of the planet, or some form of sustainable future) conditioned by the means by which we shape our future?^{39 40}

Conclusion

A Christian environmental ethic will found itself in the doctrine of creation, and by extending the love ethic of the New Testament. Christians need to rebalance their focus from the individual human to the commonwealth of life, bearing in mind the post flood covenant was between God and the earth. A theological doctrine or role is not an ethic in itself, and revision of Leopold's land ethic is a good addition to the New Testament love ethic. The religious stories of what lasts and what will fade, can inform a sustainable life. Certainly the current preoccupation with things economic is an idol.⁴¹ The proverb that from dust we were made and to dust we return, grounds us in an earth centred worldview. Perhaps a little humility is the place to start. We have to urgently learn to live sustainably (in which economics is subservient to science and ethics) within our natural limits using our best scientific knowledge. We need an ethical shift from the current economics and commodity centred consumer lifestyle to a new relationship with the earth. Given the denial of many who control our economics (and much of politics has deferred to it), and the large harm at stake, we need to attend to climate change with urgency.

³⁸ compare J Baird Callicott, "The case against moral pluralism" ch 16 in "Environmental Ethics, An anthology" Ed Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, Blackwell 2003.

³⁹ see Clare Palmer, An overview of Environmental ethics, in "Environmental Ethics, An anthology" Ed Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, Blackwell 2003, p25

⁴⁰ How does the apocalyptic picture fit with the covenant God made with Noah? In regard to sin and evil, God has chosen to take the route of suffering rather than as an eradicating power. The post flood covenant accepted the world was a mix of good and evil, but the promise to not destroy the earth now rests in God's redeeming action in Christ. The covenant is renewed using two sacraments – baptism (1 Peter 3:18f) and communion (1 Cor 11: 25). We as the body of Christ are called to respond.

⁴¹ Luke 12:13-21. See article by J Howell "Psalm 19: Relating the natural order with the Torah's wisdom" in *Theology* July/August 2009, Vol. CXII N. 868, (ISSN 0040-571 X).