

Dante's Horizon: The Logic of Creation and Macro-Relationships

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To create means to give, and he who gives, loves. John Paul II

[Love] is the principle not only of micro-relationships - with friends, with family members, or within small groups - but also of macro-relationships - social, economic, and political ones.
Benedict XVI

Grasp that, and you have the root of the matter. Evelyn Waugh

INTRODUCTION

A book of modern social inquiry has a shape that is somewhat sharply defined. It begins as a rule with an analysis, with statistics, tables of population, decrease of crime among Congregationalists, growth of hysteria among policemen, and similar ascertained facts; it ends with a chapter that is generally called "The Remedy." It is almost wholly due to this careful, solid, and scientific method that "The Remedy" is never found. For this scheme of medical question and answer is a blunder; the first great blunder of sociology. It is always called stating the disease before we find the cure. But it is the whole definition and dignity of man that in social matters we must actually find the cure before we find the disease. – G.K. Chesterton

The thesis of my presentation was that lower spheres of social life – the technical, economic, and political – are constrained by ethics, as all ecological thinkers now point out; however, one's ethics may be internally coherent while clashing violently with alternative ethical theories, and that ethical level is itself constrained by wider philosophical worldviews based on nonnegotiable positions. Without the radiant center, the logic of "creation as gift" as the foundational principle, any attempt to solve problems at the first three levels will merely instrumentalize both the persons and the things of nature that are involved. Benedict XVI called this the "trajectory of modern times,"ⁱ with its excessive rationalism, dualism, etc. Attempts to come to agreements about "saving the earth," if approached at the ethical and philosophical levels, constitute a second trajectory with its own problems, especially in regard to the inability to adjudicate competing claims; the loss of personsⁱⁱ; and the rise of a totalizing view of existence that ends in coercion. Benedict XVI would agree with Chesterton that we need to find the cure before we can even adequately characterize the disease: what is needed is what Benedict called a "new trajectory," founded on metaphysics rather than the social sciences alone, which is both relational and at the same time protective of the transcendent dignity of persons. From this perspective the technical, economic, political, and other spheres interpenetrate each other as "extensions of God's wisdom" for how we relate to the world. However idealistic it sounds, major environmental projects – not just small, local ones, but larger ones involving national governments – have succeeded in just this way: by beginning with a shared vision of the true end that is desired. Otherwise, we "collaborate" until the point is reached where we realize we have, all along, been aiming at different, often contradictory, ends.

THE DANTEAN TURN

Dante's *Paradiso* is the literary example par excellence of turning from a material, mechanical, quantitative view to one that re-visions the other levels after an encounter that opens the horizon of creation as a gift of love. That God's gift of being as love is logically prior is made clear in the actions and words of Dante's guide, Beatrice, who untangles Dante's perplexities as they stand at the horizon of the created order and the Empyrean, the Mind of God. At the end of the poem, by God's grace, there is a conversion to Christ – it is no longer Dante who lives, but Christ who lives in him – but for all persons, conversion, as Benedict XVI says “is an act of obedience toward a reality which precedes me and which does not originate from me,”ⁱⁱⁱ one on which we depend, one that is prior to everything else. Beyond the physical “Copernican Turn” to heliocentrism, this is the “Dantean Turn” to the principle of the ordering love. I begin my reflections with Dante's imaginative passages because as then-Cardinal Ratzinger said, “The saints were all people of imagination, not functionaries of apparatuses;”^{iv} and I submit that the problems in ecological philosophy and theology in general, and those in environmental management at the economic and political levels in particular, stem precisely from the ontological confusions that Beatrice dispelled.

A caveat: When Benedict XVI speaks of love being the principle of macro-relationships, the objections arise that “love” is only applicable to persons; that it is an act of their freedom and will and hence has nothing to do with intelligence, order, or truth; that it applies to the private realm alone. These and other arguments are thoroughly dealt with in David L. Schindler's *Ordering Love*, where the horizon is set by “being” in its most comprehensive sense, not simply “human being.” Love here is instead understood analogically in that all creation participates in giftedness, and “each does so in a way proportionate to its distinct way or kind of being.”^v A further discussion answers the objection that the language of love has no place in public spheres.^{vi}

“Gift” immediately implies a giver and a recipient, and they in turn imply a great deal, including receptivity (contemplative receptivity, in the case of the person); Kenneth Schmitz's *The Gift: Creation* is suggested as an introduction.^{vii} Here, I will only briefly turn to the famous story of Gandhi's watch, which he used to show the intrinsic relation between means and ends. If you desire a watch you can buy it from the owner, get it by force (or perhaps pass a confiscatory law!), or ask for it. The end appears the same – you have the watch, but, says Gandhi, in truth you have three different ends: a purchased consumer good; stolen property; or a gift.

In my own extension of Gandhi's analogy I ask: What does the pursuit of the end do to you as a person, and your relationship with the original owner? In the first case, the relation is a market one – you are a consumer, and the other is a seller – and your relationship has been reduced to an economic, contractual exchange, a relationship of utility (and a bit of coercion: because contracts are external to the person, they require laws to enforce them). In the second, you are a victim: thieves, dictators, or bureaucrats can hold a real or metaphorical gun to your head to get what they want – the relation is one of coercion. In the third case you are the recipient of a gift, and your relationship is quite different: it is a relationship that involves the whole person and whose paradigm is the family. A covenantal relationship, an alliance that is promised without regard to

what we get in return, is based, not simply on exchanging an item, in coercion or utility, but on solidarity, appreciation of our shared destiny, and the giving of oneself.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE REJECTION OF CREATION AS GIFT

Whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed...then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of “knowledge,” and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology, and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation – a world in which power and the profit margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted, and in the end exterminated... If however, we look at creation through the eyes of love, then we shall understand it... we shall understand the Why and Wherefore of creation, its very existence, for which no philosophy can ever find an adequate cause.^{viii}

There is much that is true, beautiful, and good in both secular and Catholic social science, particularly in environmental thinking, but if the foundations are inadequate, we get unintended consequences. Benedict XVI speaks of a programmatic vision based on science and praxis alone, with faith displaced to the level of the private, as the trajectory of modernity, and with this “First Trajectory” we have a mechanistic, non-relational ontology with creation as an inert backdrop, relentlessly utilitarian in its ethics. A “Second Trajectory”^{ix} contains a wide spectrum, ranging from Gaia-worshipping holism to postmodern ambiguity that derides the logos of ecology and calls instead for an eco-tonality (tonus, tension), all marked by a rejection of what Beatrice taught Dante of metaphysics, of creation, of love as order.

Whether conscious of its origin or not, most ecological philosophers accept the Heideggerian view of creation: “One must start by rejecting the first article [of Christianity], that the world was created by God, that what exists is merely an artifact, something made by a divine craftsman. This was the origin of the false devaluation of the world, contempt for the world, and denial of the world.”^x This is a dramatic misunderstanding of creation ex nihilo, making of God little more than a demiurge, conflating cosmological explanations and ontological ones,^{xi} and more: what has vanished in the resulting cybernetic language like “ecosystem,” with its properly functioning components operating like a well-oiled machine,^{xii} or “sustainability” – utility projected into the future, rather than resilience and promise – what is lost in our toxic political atmosphere, in the world of the ecological police, in the dreary earnestness of moralism divorced from truth and beauty, is any sense of amazement at the radiance of being, and of the joy and gratitude from whence both our micro-relationships and our macro-relationships should spring. Most revealing is the loss of hope. Environmentalists whose hope is centered on “world improvement” may descend into fanaticism or despair if it is not founded on something deeper:

All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action... Yet our daily efforts in pursuing our own lives and in working for the world’s future either tire us or turn into fanaticism, unless we are enlightened by the radiance of the great hope that cannot be destroyed even by small-scale failures or by a breakdown in matters of historic importance. If we cannot hope for more than is effectively attainable at any given time, or more than is promised by political or economic authorities, our lives will soon be without

hope.^{xiii}

The primary consequence of loss of hope results in pitting the child, the most concrete gift and embodiment of love, against nature. The task list of the U.N.'s 7th Millennium Development Goal, "Ensure Environmental Sustainability," uses the abstract term "populations:" the family, the mother and child, are almost entirely missing from documents on sustainability. The link between human ecology and environmental ecology is shattered; the horizon of eschatological hope collapses, and the loss of love (in all its meanings) extends to every level. If nature is seen as an "untouchable taboo,"^{xiv} persons, including the elderly and ill, are devalued, and nature is mechanized despite the claim that it is somehow "saved." The loss of generative hope for the future is so great that abortion, euthanasia, and the linking of development aid with population control become not just desiderata, but things to be decreed: many ecologists call for totalitarian actions and abrogation of democracy. If you have a vision of heaven-on-earth, sometimes you want to eliminate, or control, or subjugate anyone standing in your way. Wendell Berry pointed out that "a belief that one's method will ultimately provide a totality of answers leads to the corollary belief that it *must*, and that nothing should stand in its way." This happens when creation is lost, when political action is conceived as a means to no end other than power; when, in John Paul II's words, "the ontological and axiological difference between men and other living beings is eliminated, since the biosphere is considered a biotic unity of undifferentiated value;"^{xv} when environmental justice is sought at the expense of environmental caritas.

Sadly, most Christian reflection doesn't fare much better. Many Catholics do not understand where ecological philosophers are today; in their ignorance of theology, they see us as slaves to authoritarian, moralistic rules and a two-tier universe (hence believing that the only thing that matters is life after death), and it seems that all we can do is to go on a rearguard defensive with an apologetics that lets others set the terms,^{xvi} or jump on the bandwagon by proclaiming "we're green too!" Some "seamless garment" advocates simply juxtapose "life" and "justice" issues, as if there were no internal relation, no transcendent horizon of meaning other than they are both part of Catholic teaching. We get a laundry list of distinct rights with no underlying connection or order, rather than a kind of constitutive unity of human ecology and environmental ecology. More dangerously, "collaborating" too often means "correlating" – merging differences, or worse, renouncing essential truths for a negotiated "consensus," often won by real or rhetorical violence. Christianity becomes instrumentalized in service to a new Highest Good, "the environment" (as in spirituality institutes that see "religious stories" as a way to "save the earth"). Worst of all is when Catholics make common cause with those who believe that anti-life policies are essential, thus uncovering the truth that our ends are fundamentally opposed. In the attempt to reach a *détente* with secular ecologists, once again metaphysics, creation, and love are lost, mirroring the errors of nonbelievers.

THE CONCENTRIC SPHERES OF MACRO-RELATIONSHIPS

We now turn to another set of concentric spheres as a kind analogue to Dante's (keeping in mind, that in this analogy, as the Fourth Lateran Council said, the differences are ever greater!). In 2007, the Journal of Environmental Management published an article called "Environmental Economic, Political, and Ethical Integration in a Common Decision-making Framework."^{xvii} Its purpose was to show how different decision levels, visualized as a hierarchy of concentric

spheres, could be integrated and ordered. Conflicts related to the environment tend to be addressed first in terms of what is technically efficacious - will this work? Technological fixes may be perfectly sufficient for some problems, but they also create problems, and are deeply embedded in other levels. Solutions may be constrained by whether the fix is economically efficient (can we afford it?), constrained in turn by whether it is politically acceptable (will any voters object if we put this incinerator in a poor neighborhood?). Conflicts arising from misinformation can be resolved by correct information; conflicts that arise from opposing interests can sometimes be negotiated; but other conflicts mask underlying, *non-negotiable principles*; problems will be again displaced when it is noted that a fix may be technically efficacious, economically affordable, and politically acceptable, yet still cause intense disagreement because of the diversity of positions in environmental ethics (utilitarian, etc.). The starting point for ecological ethics was Aldo Leopold's 1949 "Land Ethic" whose basic principle was that "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," a statement that sounds compelling but which quickly unravels as ultimately inadequate both in regard to what it means for persons, and how one makes a judgment about claims that are in conflict. Ethical positions do not stand on their own but are supported by underlying philosophical perspectives, which in turn may confront each other as utterly opposing worldviews (especially, e.g., in regard to a personalist anthropology versus a "biocentric" one).

The concentric sphere model uncovers the adversarial escalation of claims and why so many environmental projects begin with lawsuits. Viable solutions at lower levels (first trajectory technical, economic, and political answers) may simply displace or postpone the problem to second trajectory concerns with ethical issues like social justice, which often have no satisfactory way to adjudicate conflicting claims and soon bump up against different philosophical valuations of, say, humans and animals. Hence the heavy-handed, top-down, responses – some environmentalists claim the problems are so urgent that we cannot wait for people to "come around;" it is astonishing how many advocate the abrogation of democracy. When we lose creation as the gift of love, and the solidarity of a shared destiny that follows, politics, economics and ethics may remain in utility and mechanization, or result in ambiguity, and may finally end in coercion.^{xviii}

THE REMEDY

Benedict XVI returned to the term "trajectory" when he said that we are called "to embark upon this new trajectory...[requiring] a *deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation*."^{xix} Neither the first trajectory, with its view of the things of nature as objectified and inert, mechanically rather than intrinsically related, nor the second trajectory, with its view of them as a field of phenomena valued equally, can be truly open to Beatrice's horizon of transcendent love. The paradigm for this type of relation is the Trinity: shared participation and grounding in a common source, with a clear distinction of beings who are bound together in love, is the *imago trinitatis* in the created order. "This is a task that cannot be undertaken by the social sciences alone...as metaphysics and theology is needed if man's transcendent dignity is to be properly understood."^{xx} Metaphysics and the social sciences are not opposed; they are connected at the deepest level, while retaining their autonomy: "The principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift... can and must find their place within normal economic activity."^{xxi} This third trajectory^{xxii} has profound implications for human and environmental ecology, whose projects must begin not

with the lowest level, but with the “Dantean Turn.”

An argument against this is that it is too idealistic to work in practice. However, many, many environmental projects have been accomplished in just this way, by beginning at the “end,” as Chesterton pointed out. And data backs up the approach. As a speaker at the conference on “Motherhood, Family, and Development Goals” at the United Nations in 2014, I asked, “What if we turned things upside down, rethought the MDG’s – what if we didn’t start with what the U.N.’s Sustainability Report calls ‘cadres’ of trained bureaucratic experts, but with mothers and families, with covenantal relationships, with our shared destiny, the beauty that we want to save?” Only after that “third trajectory” perspective were the social sciences brought in, with research that showed that supporting mothers and families did indeed advance all the MDG’s – from reducing disease and poverty and maternal mortality to increasing education, etc. Because this work is fully grounded in the reality of human persons and the way the world actually works, it is neither idealistic or “sectarian.”

CONCLUSION

Benedict XVI said, “Anyone who excludes God from his horizon falsifies the very notion of reality.”^{xxiii} The Dantean Turn is not essentially about adding an alternative sphere, a wider circumference, but rather recasting all else in view of a qualitative difference. There is, of course, Christian philosophy, but the Event of Christ on our horizon is not a philosophy or a metanarrative or an idea. That the human person can be dissolved into the biosphere, that science, economics and politics are metaphysically neutral, that that we can reconcile our clashing ethical positions either within a mechanistic ontology, or within one that sees persons and nature as “a biotic unity of undifferentiated value,” can only lead to a new form of totalitarianism, that is, not any particular system of government, but an alternate reality, an inhuman, totalizing ideology all the more dangerous because people don’t see it. Fantastical notions of ideology are opposed not with another ideology but with the gift that is prior to us, the reality that we, and certainly the state, did not create.

The goodness of most ecologists’ intentions, Christian or not, is beyond question. “The universal dividing line between good and evil runs not between countries...not between parties, not between classes [and I would add, not between environmentalists and entrepreneurs, or ecologists and theologians, or between environmental activists and employees of big energy companies].... It divides the heart of every man.”^{xxiv} Although to live within an ontology of creation as gift, as ordering love, is not an optional add-on that we can set aside in order to get along, the answer is not “do not collaborate,” but that the macro-relationships – the lower spheres of the social sciences – should be illuminated by the qualitative difference that the Church has to offer.

Dante is truly someone who calls us to “put out into the deep”, as John Paul II did. In Canto II he said that those of us following in our little boats should stick close to the wake of his ship, lest we be lost. Two ships can be getting closer to each other because they are each on a course to the same destination, or they can be approaching because they are going in completely opposite directions to different ends. Some people think we should veer off and follow behind the ships of the world’s environmentalists. But in love, we should share what we have, we should call them to conversion, to that gift of reality which precedes us, to a solidarity and true dialogue beyond

what they can imagine, and to the only Remedy, the one that “moves the Sun and other stars.”

ⁱ Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi* 17.

ⁱⁱ In the philosophies of identity “persons are not ultimate reality...the person, the contrast between the I and the Thou, belongs to the sphere of distinctions;” instead, the boundaries between persons, and between persons and the natural world, “are absorbed, are revealed as provisional.” (Ratzinger, Joseph. *Truth and Tolerance*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004. P. 34). While he is speaking of Asian religions, the same holds true for ecologies of identity where “individual organisms are conceived as momentary formations of energy rather than enduring material objects....The study of nature by analysis of isolated objects becomes untenable not only because isolation alters their sense but because, as fixed forms, their existence is too transient to bear study.” See Sally Gadow, “Existential Ecology: The Human/Natural World.” *Soc. Sci. Med.* 35:4 (1992):597-602.

ⁱⁱⁱ Benedict XVI. *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today's Debates*. Ignatius Press, 1995. P. 58.

^{iv} Ratzinger, Joseph. *The Ratzinger Report*. Ignatius Press, 1985. P. 67

^v Schindler, David. L. *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011. P. 4.

^{vi} *Ibid.* pages 10-11.

^{vii} Schmitz, Kenneth. *The Gift: Creation*. Marquette University Press, 1982.

^{viii} Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Love Alone is Credible*. Ignatius Press, 2004. Pp. 114-115.

^{ix} This term is not meant to reduce radically diverse schools of thought to one, but to categorize those that *through their own self-description* set themselves in opposition to modernity’s dualism, utilitarianism, and reductionism.

^x S.J. McGrath. *The Early Heidegger*. Catholic University of America Press, 2006. P. 55, quoting H. Buhr’s *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*.

^{xi} This confusion plagues every single ecological philosophy. Even the brilliant physicist Stephen Hawking is vanquished by it: he explains creation *ex nihilo* this way: “Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing;” whole universes can arise from nothing due to “negative gravitational energy.” Where that comes from he does not say. His point is still cosmological, not ontological. *The Grand Design*. Bantam Press 2012. P.180.

^{xii} Attempting to avoid a mechanical view of ecosystems for a “holistic” one runs into its own problems: “Dismantling the whole into subsystems to study, for example, rain forests or deserts, defeats the field approach. If the whole itself is the smallest unit of analysis, the concept of ecosystem remains uselessly abstract, another version of Nature as Such. The fallacy is that ‘whole’ is an objective designation operating in a relational model that precludes objectivity. A field ontology entails engagement because to exist means to be related essentially to other beings. On that view there is no external standpoint from which to delineate the whole.” Gadow, op cit.

^{xiii} Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 35.

^{xiv} Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* 92.

^{xv} “John Paul II, “Address to the Conference on Environment and Health.” March 24, 1997.

^{xvi} With some, the apologetic focus forefronts cosmology (e.g., trying to deduce God from Intelligent Design); with others, the acceptance of a desacralized view of our origins results in the devaluing of the Incarnation and Redemption, which in truth cannot be separated from Creation. This is why we sometimes get theological thinking on ecology that calls for a “Dream of the Earth” that goes beyond Christ, Scripture, Mary, and the Church. Still others are unable to conceive of persons as anything more than good “stewards” of the earth, not in John Paul II’s terms, but rather as reduced to function: hired managers for an absentee landlord, who care less for what they guard than do the owners. We lose the deeper ontological relationality of *children* of our Father and *heirs* to his kingdom.

^{xvii} Pablo Martinez de Anguita et al, DOI:10.106/j.jenvman.2007.02.002

^{xviii} When relationships and dialogue are attempted at the level of the lower circles of problem-solving, too often the stances of the persons involved are ideologically guided and marked by antagonism and opposition; “sides” are taken; and people or groups try to force others toward solutions or decisions staked out in advance. The point is to begin from what is shared, from what is loved in solidarity, and work back from there.

^{xix} CV 53.

^{xx} CV 53. By “metaphysics” Benedict does not mean the fictional monolith created by the postmodern critique.

^{xxi} CV 36.

^{xxii} “Third” here does not refer, as I have suggested, to a “third” in a developmental series, or to an alternative to the other two; it includes the other two, recast in a new light.

^{xxiii} *Shrine of Aparecida*. Sunday, 13 May 2007

^{xxiv} Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. *From Under the Rubble*. Little, Brown, 1975. Page 107.