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The question for us now is – how is one to act given the nature of the human predicament? Does the recognition of these multiple uncertainties lead to confusion, enfeeblement, non-action? Does it paralyse us? Or does it define a particular course of action, with certain defining characteristics that derive from our recognition of the ineluctable presence of uncertainty?¹

In this universe, shaped by open and inter-communicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God's transcendence, within which it develops.²

A Role for Spirituality in the Path to Centered Environmental Ethics

My entire memory is post-9/11, and I have never lived in a world without the internet.

Fundamental, too, in the worldview and experience of me and my peers is common understanding of anthropogenic climate change, and worry over the coming disaster it is likely to bring. Similarly fundamental is the uncertainty of this future: we cannot know precisely what changes is coming, how they will manifest and interact with other changes. We often seem have as little knowledge of when changes can be expected as did Noah, waiting for the flood to subside from the Earth.

The basic idea that spirituality has the power to guide our interactions with the natural world is one undertaken by authors with widely varying views. The most common approaches locate the responsibility to understand and use this power in every individual. While some iterations of such theories are quite compelling, many are wrapped in anxiety over reaching a

¹ Mihir Shah, "The Power of Uncertainty: Reflections on the Nature of Transformational Initiatives," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 25 (June 19, 2010): 56.

² Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 57.

requisite number of people, or make their theories subject to endless criticism as to their practical applications. This latter type, I think, has drastically less to offer.

Some authors take a broad view, merely raising the possibility that practical plans for action can be given stakes by belief in the sacred.³ Some give the particular reasons for such beliefs more specificity, such as Norman Wirzba. In his beautiful article, “A Priestly Approach to Environmental Theology,” he takes our very existence in the world to be a sign of God’s caring. Wirzba proposes that in an attitude characterized by certain sorts of sacrifice, asceticism, and gratitude, we can gain an understanding of the world as a gift to be received with the fullest possible awareness of its magnitude.⁴ Thomas Berry, the author of *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, proposes that the change needed is not merely to allow existing religious traditions to guide us to better environmental practices. His ideal is an almost pre-Enlightenment attitude: a mystical understanding of nature, in which mutual fulfillment is shared in, and thus found by, humans and the Earth alike.⁵

Much less useful, as it seems, is the variety of thought that places the effect of religious teaching on whole communities in the purely hypothetical, or (and occasionally as well as) positioned only in the past. This approach shows itself in statements like the following: “The historical record makes clear that religious teaching, example, and leadership are powerfully able to influence...as scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence

³ Willis Jenkins, “Sustainability Theory,” in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability: The Spirit of Sustainability*, (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, 2010), 384.

⁴ Norman Wirzba, “A Priestly Approach to Environmental Theology,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 4 (December 2011): 354, 357, 358.

⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 153, 166, 169.

before the universe.”⁶ This hypothetical approach, as limiting and stingy as it stands, is complicated and made further distant by Willis Jenkins in the introduction to his article “Environmental Pragmatism, Adaptive Management, and Cultural Reform,” where he writes,

Environmental pragmatists tend to disdain cosmological approaches because they seem to abstract from actual problems... while agreeing that some of the pragmatist criticism is warranted, I argue that a pragmatic strategy needs the inventive work of moral innovators in order to address the sort of sustainability problems that outstrip current cultural competencies.⁷

I read this approach as problematic because it drives us so far away from Wirzba's direct requirement for “priestly” action and from Berry’s concept of being in community with the continent itself. In trying to be responsible a tight link between theory and the practical exigencies of our ecological crisis, it leaves the stakes for spirituality low. It falls prey to the problem Bratton articulates: “religious ethical environmental response is often the most empowered and ecologically friendly when drawing on the mystical, metaphorical and transcendent—exactly the point where science is the most skeptical.”⁸ It is fair enough to acknowledge that a purely practical-minded, scientific view is unequipped and potentially unwilling to engage with a spiritually centered imperative. However, if we accept this as the most important worldview, then we have very little room for impact. Furthermore, most people do not hold this particular, narrow view in the first place.

⁶ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, “Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of World Religions and Ecology,” *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (Fall 2001), 10.

⁷ Willis Jenkins, “Environmental Pragmatism, Adaptive Management, and Cultural Reform,” *Ethics and the Environment* 16, no.1 (2011): 53.

⁸ Susan Power Bratton, “Tradition as Benefit or Barrier? The Case of Christian Religion in the Formation of Environmental Ethics in the United States,” in *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World*, ed. Ricardo Rozzi et. al., (Springer, 2013), 82.

Bratton may have identified one of the critical gaps in understanding, but her chapter in *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World* is a prime example of another insufficient mode of understanding. She takes the importance of the environment in religion literally, as far as it brings about regional religious differences, practices linking spirituality to agriculture and the seasons, environmentalist volunteerism, and the like.⁹ As a logical result of this excessively literal mode, she allows her ideas to apply only to those religious communities which she assesses to have broadly bought into scientifically accepted mainstream. One could take the slightly patronizing view that everyone had indeed better get on board with the scientists, and if any are unwilling to listen to reason, then we can despair of their ever engaging with environmental issues for any reason, much less a spiritual one. I am inclined to believe, however, that such a view unnecessarily excludes people who, despite feeling alienated from or wary of the scientific establishment, have the same tendency and capacity for caring and stewardship as those who “believe in science.”

The idea on which Tucker and Grim, as well as Bratton, have all landed is a relatively morally un-demanding way we could bring a larger group of people onto the train of “green” practices. It does not ask any individual, for example, to push their own spiritual community further. By relying on institutional buy-in, it does not really demand that each person listen to their internally guided values around environmental care. Berry, on the other hand, has a much more nuanced and challenging solution. His ultimate goal does ask each individual to pay attention to their most closely held beliefs. Do you allow for something “of God,” as Friends

⁹ Bratton, “Tradition as Benefit or Barrier?”, 73, 75.

might say, in the perfect innocence of the land itself?¹⁰ Do you see nature as something to be endlessly taken from, or something with which you can be in community in some way?¹¹ Something we do not live on, but live with, just as we live with our human neighbors?

A number of authors either touch on or make their focus the seemingly inherent opposition between privileging economic needs in governance, and taking care of the Earth. At its base, this is the problem of the demands the economy places on nature, if individuals, corporations, and governments continue to view it as a continuously renewable source of raw materials. Judith Koons wastes no words linking corporate activity with the coming “potentially cascading catastrophe” of environmental damage.¹² Tucker and Grim make the logical extension of the economics-first approach, which also eventually relies on technology to solve problems once they are created, and say that such solutions will clearly not suffice.¹³

However, there is a further nuance to the problems that arise from privileging the economy. This is the issue that our systems of law and governance place not just humans above nature, but as Koons specifies, “the ‘human’ at the normative center of the law reflects the interests of elite white men and powerful corporations.”¹⁴ She may take this norm as given, but Chaone Mallory has more to say about how it arose and what ideologies support it. As Mallory articulates, language like “Mother Nature” and ideas of people who are “closer to nature” as typically women and/or people of color, as well as the opposition of the rational/male/human

¹⁰ Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 157

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 168–169.

¹² Judith E. Koons, “At the Tipping Point: Defining an Earth Jurisprudence for Social and Ecological Justice,” *Loyola Law Review* 58 (2012): 357.

¹³ Tucker and Grim, “Introduction,” 5.

¹⁴ Koons, “At the Tipping Point,” 366.

with the emotional/female/natural, position nature as available for exploitation and degradation.¹⁵ Understanding an imbalance of power that favors economic interests in these terms, Koons' assumption seems far less inevitable, but it is clear how it arose. The "rational," principally elite male-run economy may exist because of its exploitable resources, but it dominates because those natural and human resources are at its ideological, as well as practical, mercy.

The thread through these various writings that interests me most, and yet the one I have had the most difficulty tracing, is the one of universalism, objective morality, and shared ethics. As I discussed previously, I have a fundamental problem engaging with a concept of spiritual relation to the environment that waits for institutional buy-in to a defined set of correct ideas. I do not believe such a concept is wide, generous, or forgiving enough to hold all of what society needs it to hold. I simultaneously read, in many authors, a tendency to fall back in the end on something absolute, catholic, and perhaps objective, as entirely inadequate as this last concept seems. John Woolman described universalism in religion as follows:

There is a Principle which is pure, placed in the human Mind, which in different Places and Ages hath had different Names; it is, however, pure, and proceeds from God. It is deep, and inward, confined to no Forms of Religion, nor excluded from any, where the Heart stands in perfect Sincerity. In whomsoever this takes Root and grows, of what Nation soever, they become Brethren.¹⁶

I find Woolman persuasive, to a considerable degree. I am a Friend deeply convinced of the truth of an inward light in each person. I am also constitutionally unable to accept that all the lowercase-"f" friends I know to have vastly different spiritual and religious dispositions could

¹⁵ Chaone Mallory, "Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, and Power," in *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World*, ed. Ricardo Rozzi et. al., (Springer, 2013), 254.

¹⁶ John Woolman, *The Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia Mott Gummere (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1922), 180.

not be somehow bringing forth the same light. And yet I am hard-pressed, in considering the relationship of my own spirituality to my environmental ethics, to determine exactly what about it is at all universally, much less objectively, determined.

Jenkins' book introduction *Ethics in the Anthropocene* asks the future of humanity to stand on "the future of ethics—which stands in jeopardy."¹⁷ To a student at a university lauded for the high starting salaries of its business school graduates, which awards large prizes for technological innovation, it seems that there is nothing forcing us to build a new moral narrative around our relationship to the environment. Everyone here believes in climate change, so to speak but where do we finally land? Not only do we have a globalized economic world guided by many apparently detached ethical worlds, but we seem to be making little progress towards rectifying the separation.¹⁸ As Jenkins notes, we have no precedent for a moral species changing the course of life on Earth.¹⁹ If we were to unify our shared environmental ethics, it would likely be around an obligation to the future, however that could be defined.²⁰ Notwithstanding the nebulous nature of that idea, applying it would require a social understanding broader than that of any community that has ever existed, and a time scale many generations forward longer than most of us ever look into the past. Neither of these is comprehensible in the terms presented by any ordinary individual life.

¹⁷ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ Tucker and Grim, "Introduction," 6.

There are very few imaginable sources of a common moral narrative, one that could possibly operate in the kind of scope required. One seems to be that of bringing the ideas currently in common use to their most clear meaning and fullest form. For example, the concepts of “sustainability” and “social justice,” as Jenkins describes, “start from acknowledgment of human power as a moral fact,” and exist “as concepts for making this transient moment of human power merely less short and violent than it might otherwise be.”²¹ This approach will require work by those in power to be present in the human implications of the terms they use; to those used to tossing about phrases like “sustainable development” while leaving them relatively unexamined, it will require a revision of understandings that might be uncomfortable.²² Acknowledging that what the world requires of us might be a gratitude grounded in priestly ethics of asceticism and sacrifice, or a concession that the same ideologies underpinning race, gender, and class injustice also allow environmental damage, may be difficult for the people who make the rules governing the global economy.²³ If we must continue to understand climate change as a measurable scientific phenomenon, and our systems of government must continue to bow to the demands of the economy, then we must harness all the moral power that can be wrung from principles like justice, sustainability, and peace, and thence hope for the best.

Our other option is extraordinarily more difficult and inevitably less popular, and it would be virtually foolproof if only it were not so unimaginable. That is, we may find a way to put a theology of our environment, grounded in universalism, into some kind of spiritual “translation” to the experiences of every distant individual and community. As I read Koons, Berry, Jenkins,

²¹ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 13.

²² Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 168.

²³ See note 4; Mallory, “Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, and Power,” 254.

Mallory, Francis, and even an eighteenth-century Quaker, I cannot help but feel that if God is present in nature, and present in us, and present in the people who would decry our principles as heresy (whether religious, economic, or political), then there ought to be something there for everyone to hold onto.²⁴ In the world as I know and understand it, to imagine this hypothetical alignment happening before we fall off some environmental cliff is well-nigh ridiculous. There is just one other crucial principle underlying it. This is the idea, mentioned briefly by Koons and attributed to Wendell Berry, of “primary value” in topsoil, that sustaining thing that humans cannot create with any technology.²⁵ Blood immediately came to mind as another such substance, one as rich with religious symbolism, and there seems to be an ethical and spiritual purity to the universalizing power of physical things.

I hope I am not too glib in remarking that I am fortunate to believe in continuing revelation. That said, I am inclined to believe that if we care for our communities as though they were our family; for distant people as though they were our community; for those with less power as though our advantage was immaterial; and above all, for the Earth as though it too was human and powerful, we might avoid disaster. That which exists in Houston, for example, to allow human life, healthy relationships, art, culture, creativity, gratitude for natural gifts, and communion with other species must be allowed to continue to thrive. We must approach protecting a city from flood damage by also protecting its people from being too poor to be able

²⁴ I do not wish to imply that my theology should be this unifying one; rather, I am merely using the terms I understand best. Francis gives the following useful explanation of what I believe to be a closely related idea: “They [creation accounts in Genesis] suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the Earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity, and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.” *Laudato si'*, 48.

²⁵ Wendell Berry, cited in Koons, “At the Tipping Point,” 382.

to find suitable housing; by facilitating the rebuilding of what must be rebuilt, and the relocation of what is more responsibly relocated; and by ensuring that the city does not exist to the exclusion of that which nature placed there, or only for the purposes of exploiting it. Our only real choice, if my generation is to bring children into the world, is to succeed.