

Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

BY J A M E S C H A E F E R

Though John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, when reflecting on the creation story, valued all types of creatures, living and non-living, intrinsically for their unique goodness and instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others, they valued most highly their complex interrelation in the physical world.

The story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis underscores the goodness of creation. It depicts God as creating light/day, the sky, dry land, birds and water creatures, wild animals and other land creatures, and humans, declaring them each “good” and together “very good.” Following the advent of Christianity, theologians reflected on this story and affirmed the goodness of many diverse beings, their superlative goodness altogether, and God’s valuing them. The context of their reflections and their nuances varied as they wrote from their understandings of the world and the contexts of the times in which they lived. Some were responding to heresies that denigrated the material world. Some developed comprehensive theologies about God’s relationship to the world. All theologians shared a profoundly monotheistic faith perspective: God is the creator of all natural beings that constitute the universe, each living and inanimate being has a God-given purpose, and the entire universe is utterly dependent upon God for its ongoing existence.

John Chrysostom (347-407), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) are among the many theologians who reflected on the goodness of God’s creation. They considered the many diverse creatures as good in themselves (intrinsically), as good for human use (instrumental-

ly), and as superlatively good when all creatures function appropriately in relation to one another as God intends (intrinsically-instrumentally). In this essay I highlight aspects of their reflections about the goodness of creatures and God's valuation of them, discuss the significance of their reflections during our age of widespread ecological degradation, and conclude with general ways we should be acting today if we embrace their teachings.

VALUING EARTH INTRINSICALLY AND INSTRUMENTALLY

In *The Enchiridion* and the *Nature of the Good*, Augustine described God as "the supremely good Creator"¹ who created from nothing the universe of "good things, both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal."² Each has innate characteristics that are unquestionably good. The expansiveness of his valuing them both intrinsically and instrumentally is exemplified in *The Trinity*, where he declared:

...the earth is good by the height of its mountains, the moderate elevation of its hills, and the evenness of its fields; and good is the farm that is pleasant and fertile; and good is the house that is arranged throughout in symmetrical proportions and is spacious and bright; and good are the animals, animate bodies; and good is the mild and salubrious air; and good is the food that is pleasant and conducive to health; and good is health without pains and weariness; and good is the countenance of man with regular features, a cheerful expression, and a glowing color; and good is the soul of a friend with the sweetness of concord and the fidelity of love; and good is the just man; and good are riches because they readily assist us; and good is the heaven with its own sun, moon, and stars.³

In *Nature of the Good*, Augustine wrote that even the decay and diminishing of a body is good as long as it exists.⁴ Existence itself is good, he noted, because it is made possible by God and upheld in existence by God.

Reflecting on Genesis 1, John Chrysostom dwelled on the text's depiction of God's valuing each type of creature as "good." He identified creatures both beneficial and harmful to humans as good in themselves:

Among the growth springing up from the earth it was not only plants that are useful but also those that are harmful, and not only trees that bear fruit but also those that bear none; and not only tame animals but also wild and unruly ones. Among the creatures emerging from the waters it was not only fish but also sea monsters and other fierce creatures. It was not only inhabited land but also the unpeopled; not only level plains but also mountains and woods. Among birds it was not only tame ones and those suitable for our food but also wild and unclean ones, hawks and vultures and many others of that kind. Among the creatures produced from the earth it was not only tame animals but also snakes, vipers, serpents, lions,

and leopards. In the sky it was not only showers and kindly breezes but also hail and snow.⁵

For Chrysostom, anyone who found fault with these creatures or inquired in any disparaging way about their purpose or use would be showing ingratitude to God, their Creator.

Advancing Augustine's and Chrysostom's thinking about the goodness of creatures, Thomas Aquinas depicted each creature as perfect in some way that God implanted in them. Each is endowed by God with an innate way of existing, and, if living, an innate way of acting. Each type of creature is unique. Each has a grade of goodness based on its innate characteristics – plants with a greater goodness than the earth from which they grow and draw sustenance for flourishing, animals than plants because animals can act and perform many functions plants cannot, humans than animals due to the human capacity to think and make informed decisions ultimately oriented toward eternal happiness with God. While each type of creature is valuable in itself, creatures are also valuable to one another for their sustenance and flourishing; they are altogether essential and therefore valuable to the world's functioning as intended by God. Their value to one another is through their usefulness – plants use the earth and other elements, animals use plants, and humans are intended to use both animals and plants for the *necessities* of life, not to satisfy superfluous wants.⁶ Advancing this "order of instrumentality" of the world to God, Aquinas analogized that all creatures are like God's instruments created to serve God's purposes.⁷

Though theologians valued all types of creatures intrinsically for their unique goodness and valued them instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others, they valued most highly the entirety of the physical world. They believed God wisely created the universe, generously endowed it with the capability of maintaining itself internally, and actively sustains that capability in existence. When reflecting on Genesis 1:31, in which God is depicted as having finished creating the world and declaring it "very good," Augustine described the ensemble of all creatures as a "wonderful order and beauty"⁸ and a "tranquility of order" that brings about "the peace of the universe."⁹ Aquinas expounded systematically on the goodness of the universe that is brought about by the orderly functioning of its constituents in relation to one another, describing it glowingly as the greatest created good, the highest perfection of the created world, and its most beautiful attribute.¹⁰ The order of creatures to one another is the nearest thing to God's goodness, he insisted, because every particular good is ordered to the good of the whole.¹¹ That some things exist for the sake of others and also for the sake of the perfection of the universe is not contradictory, he taught, for some are needed by others to maintain the internal integrity of the universe and all things are needed to contribute to its perfection.¹² When all parts function in relation to one another in innately appropriate ways as

intended by God, the universe is indeed perfect, reflects God's goodness, and manifests God's glory.¹³

Closely aligned with theologians' understanding of the greater goodness of the totality of God's creation is Aquinas's teaching that God created living and non-living entities in relation to one another to achieve their common good – the internal sustainability of the world. To achieve the common good, he reasoned, God instilled in each creature a natural inclination toward the good of the whole so each is inclined according to its nature – intellectually, sensitively, or naturally – to the common good of all. Their common good is the internal sustainability of the world, according to Aquinas, while their ultimate good is God.¹⁴ Because humans often act incorrectly by not directing their actions toward the common good of all, he continued, God cares providentially for individuals by offering them grace that can help them exercise their wills appropriately.¹⁵ God's grace cooperates with the individual by actively sustaining the human's innate capacity to make informed decisions and to choose to act accordingly. God's grace also operates on and cooperates with humans to develop moral virtues that will aid them in exercising their wills appropriately to achieve the common good in this life because they are motivated to achieve eternal life with God.¹⁶

EMBRACING GOD'S VALUATION OF THE EARTH

In *Confessions*, Augustine counted the number of times in Genesis 1 that God is depicted as having created an entity, viewed it, and proclaimed it good.¹⁷ God is the ultimate authority, Augustine insisted, and what God sees as wondrously good, humans should also see as wondrously good; they should move beyond their greed and value natural beings intrinsically for themselves and their place in the orderly scheme of creation.

Chrysostom, when reflecting on Genesis 1, emphasized the authority of God's valuation and warned his flock against the "arrogant folly" of deviating from God's valuing of the physical world. He first told them to "shun... like a lunatic" anyone who did not acquiesce to God's judgment about the world's goodness, and he subsequently instructed them to inform the ignorant about God's valuation in order to "check" the person's "unruly tongue."¹⁸ Characterizing the Earth as "mother and nurse" created by God to nourish humans, Chrysostom urged his listeners and readers to enjoy her as their "homeland" and to be grateful to God for her.¹⁹

Connecting the human difficulty in valuing the physical world to human limitations and self-centered tendencies, Augustine explained that humans are gifted with intellectual abilities, but their entrenchment in a part of the universe and their condition as mortal beings prevents them from comprehending the universe in its entirety. Only God has this comprehensive ability, he insisted. Nevertheless, humans should strive to overcome their narrow-mindedness and self-centeredness. They should not judge negatively some natural beings and forces that cause them personal discom-

forts. They should consider the natures of things in themselves without regard to their convenience or inconvenience, their pleasantness or unpleasantness, their comfort or discomfort. They should praise God for all aspects of the physical world and never “in the rashness of human folly” allow themselves to find fault in any way with the work of the “great Artificer.”²⁰ He also cautioned his readers to use other creatures appropriately. Every human who uses these goods correctly “shall receive goods greater in degree and superior in kind, namely the peace of immortality” within which God can be enjoyed eternally; but the person who uses these goods incorrectly “shall lose them, and shall not receive the blessings of eternal life.”²¹

Aquinas emphasized God’s valuation by explaining restrictions on the “natural dominion” God gave humans over the world while God maintains “absolute dominion” over everything.²² Natural dominion is based on the human ability to know and to will good outcomes that are consistent with the orderly universe God created. Thus, humans should be cooperating with God by carrying out God’s plan for the world.²³ During patristic to medieval times, theologians did not anticipate technologies and practices that could threaten the functioning of ecosystems and the biosphere of Earth.

After discussing God’s love for all creatures and love for the order of the universe, Aquinas advanced the human relation to other creatures by exclaiming that they should love the world with the highest kind of love — *maxime et caritate* — in two ways.²⁴ One way is loving other living and inanimate creations as goods that

should be conserved for God’s honor and glory. This relates to Aquinas’s and other theologians’ faith perspective that the natural world in its entirety best manifests God’s goodness. To them, the natural world has a sacramental quality insofar as the invisible God can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character can be known through the visible, especially God’s goodness, power, and wisdom.²⁵ Another way of loving Earth with its diverse creatures is by loving them for their usefulness to humans as goods they need in temporal life while aiming for eternal happiness with God.

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VALUING EARTH IN AN AGE OF ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION

Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, and their contemporaries can contribute to our thinking today about the goodness of Earth with

its many varied creatures and how they should be valued. Though these theologians wrote from pre-scientific understandings of the world as a static, hierarchically-arranged cosmos with living and non-living beings created by God exactly as they can be observed, they adhered to the fundamental Christian belief that the world would not be if God did not will its existence, sustain its existence, and have a purpose for its existence.

Continuing this foundational belief and informing it with our current scientific understanding of the world, goodness can be attributed to the cosmological-biological process out of which Earth and all natural entities have emerged over a 13.8 billion year period. Goodness can also be attributed to their many diverse natures, relationships to one another, and interactions for their common good as communities, ecological systems, the biosphere of Earth, and the universe in its totality. The entirety of the dynamic world can be acknowledged as God's valuable possession, a manifestation of God's extravagant goodness, and a readily available subject for scientific discovery. Faithful humans can be understood as beholders of the world's value and responders to that value out of a desire to share in God's valuation.

When our thinking about the goodness of creation is inspired by these theological giants of the Christian tradition, we see significant implications for our behavior in response to the accelerated rate of species extinction, the degradation and destruction of ecosystems, and threats to the biosphere of Earth. All species and abiota – non-living factors like air regimes, land masses, and waters – are valuable intrinsically as essential components of Earth, and they are also valuable instrumentally as needed by other components to sustain themselves within the web of existence. Ecosystems are valuable intrinsically as composites of intrinsically-instrumentally valuable biota and abiota functioning interdependently to sustain their shared existence, and they are also valuable instrumentally for their contributions to the sustainability of the larger biosphere. The biosphere of Earth is valuable intrinsically as the composite of all systems with biotic and abiotic constituents along with adjoining marginal areas that altogether constitute Earth, and the biosphere is also valuable instrumentally as a home used by humans, other species, and ecosystems. The entirety of the physical world with its many diverse constituents is valuable to God, their purposeful creator and sustainer in existence, who made possible the emergence of humans with the intellectual capacity to discover and value the physical world's goodness both intrinsically and instrumentally and to demonstrate their valuations when acting in all aspects of life.

If one way of orienting ourselves to God is by valuing Earth intrinsically and instrumentally, how should faith-filled people act toward other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere of Earth? Having emerged from and with other entities through the cosmological-biological process, the faithful who believe the physical world is good should *value the evolutionary process* by functioning constructively within it so it can continue to facilitate the emer-

gence of more good and valuable entities. The faithful will also value this process as the conduit through which human and all other species are able to obtain the necessities of life. Because there are functional, historical, and evolutionary limits to the physical world, the faithful will strive to know those limits, live within them, and make changes in their lifestyles compatible with those limits. When functioning cooperatively with other species and abiota, the faithful will be cooperating with God's gratuitous empowerment of this dynamic process and, thereby, valuing what God values.

With Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Aquinas, people who profess faith in God should value *each species, the air, land, and water* intrinsically and demonstrate their valuation accordingly. All other species will be valued in themselves as entities that have emerged over time and space. Integral to discovering their value is the need to discern their interests in surviving and their survival needs. Human interference with their meeting these needs will be avoided in local to global arenas. Species' habitats will be protected, and lists of threatened and endangered species will diminish. Efforts will be made to curtail pollutants and persistent toxicants from the air, water, and land to demonstrate the faithful's valuation of abiotic environment.

The *relations among species, air, land, and water* should be discerned and valued intrinsically and instrumentally by people who believe God is the creator, sustainer, and ultimate valuer of the physical world. Land species use air, water, land, and other species to maintain themselves. Marine species rely upon water and select species to maintain themselves. Airborne species rely upon the air, water, land, and individuals of other species to maintain themselves.

Humans rely upon individuals of other species for food, air to breathe, water to drink, and land upon which to maintain themselves.

Instead of thinking about other species, air, land, and water exclusively for their usefulness to humans, however, the faithful will recognize and value the use that other species have for one another, the air, the land, and the water for their sustenance in the complex web of life.

Following Augustine, John Chrysostom, Aquinas, and other eminent theologians, people who profess faith in God should discover and acknowledge *the contributions that species and abiota make to their shared ecosystems*. Actions that inhibit their contributions will be identified and prevented. Proposed projects will be scrutinized to assure that each constituent can

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continue to contribute to the system. Species that are non-native to systems will not be introduced to them, and efforts will be expended to remove invasive species from an ecosystem into which they have been introduced.

Furthermore, the *overall functioning of these systems* should be valued both intrinsically and instrumentally by the faithful. The complex interactions of biota and abiota that establish and reconstruct ecosystems will be discerned and valued accordingly by people who restrain themselves individually and collectively from disrupting a system's functioning and, thereby, deterring it from achieving its common good – its sustainability. The sustainability of ecological systems and the greater biosphere will serve as an organizing principle for decision-making. A vision of the future informed by the past and the present will be essential to making prudent decisions at all levels of governance. Needs will take precedence over wants, and superfluous use and abuse of other species and abiota will be proscribed. Because humans rely upon the land, air, waters, and species that constitute ecosystems for human health and well-being, the faithful will demonstrate gratitude to them for their use and gratitude to God for making their use possible. With Aldo Leopold, the faithful will think about themselves as citizens of ecosystems rather than conquerors of them.²⁶

Finally, the faithful who embrace Aquinas's teachings about the common good should *value the functioning of Earth as the best manifestation of God's abundant goodness* in making our planet in this solar system possible and sustaining its dynamic existence. Other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere will be recognized as having sacramental qualities through which God's presence can be experienced and aspects of God's character that can be discerned: God's *self-limiting power* by endowing the universe with the innate ability to unfold in increasing diversity and complexity over expanding space and extending time; God's *freedom-giving* to the universe to self-organize without coercion or interference with its processes; God's *generosity* through the seemingly endless potentialities with which God has endowed matter to develop creatively; God's *wisdom* through the physical laws within which chance occurrences are operative; God's *humility* by allowing the universe to play itself out in surprising ways amidst considerable suffering, decay, waste, and death; and, God's *patience* throughout the billions of years in which the universe has expanded from an infinitesimal entity to billions of galaxies out of which at least one planet evolving around a medium-sized, middle-aged star has produced a magnificent array of ecosystems with their varied biota, including intelligent beings who have the ability to discern, reflect on, and respond to God's self-communication to value Earth intrinsically and instrumentally.

NOTES

1 Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, 10, translated by J. F. Shaw (Chicago, IL: Regnery Publishing, 1961).

2 Augustine, *The Nature of the Good*, 1, in John H. S. Burleigh, translator, *Augustine*:

Earlier Writings (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953). See also Tarsicius Van Bavel, "The Creator and the Integrity of Creation in the Fathers of the Church, Especially in Saint Augustine," *Augustinian Studies*, 21 (1990), 1-33, and Howard J. Van Till, "Basil, Augustine, and the Doctrine of Creation's Functional Integrity," *Science and Christian Belief*, 8 (1996), 21-38.

3 Augustine, *The Trinity*, 8.3, translated by Stephen McKenna, C.Ss.R., Fathers of the Church 45 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

4 Augustine, *Nature of the Good*, 3-4.

5 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, Homily 10, translated by Robert C. Hill, Fathers of the Church 74 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986).

6 Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 193-203.

7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.100, translated by the English Dominican Fathers from the Leonine Edition (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1924).

8 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 10.

9 Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God, Against the Pagans*, 19.13, translated by Henry Bettenson (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1972).

10 Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 2.39, 2.45, and 3.71.

11 Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.64 and 3.112.

12 Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.112.

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 65, a. 2, translated by the English Dominican Fathers from the Leonine Edition (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1920), 326.

14 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 26, a. 3.

15 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 22, a. 2.

16 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 111, a. 2.

17 Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 13.29, translated by John K. Ryan (Garden City, NJ: Image Books, 1960).

18 Chrysostom, *Homilies*, 10.13.

19 Chrysostom, *Homilies*, 9.3 and 10.12

20 Augustine, *City of God*, 12.4.

21 Augustine, *City of God*, 19.13.

22 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 96, a. 1.

23 Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.20.

24 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 25, a. 3.

25 Schaefer, *Theological Foundations*, 65-80.

26 Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine, 1949), 203-204.



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