

At Home in the Cosmos: The Revealing of the Sons of God

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IN THIS ESSAY I want to think about the meaning of the words “saving the planet.” As a believer I am specifically interested in the Christian meaning of “salvation.” So, what exactly is the relation between ecology and redemption? I will also touch on the question of hope, and hopelessness. Despair is a serious issue these days, and it needs to be addressed. More and more ecologists today seem to require counseling.

My subtitle comes from the eighth chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans (18–23), where the Apostle writes:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the *revealing of the sons of God*. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who *subjected it in hope*; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been *groaning in travail* together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the *redemption of our bodies*. (Italics added)

This passage is quite dense, and has been much commented upon. It seems to imply, first, that the “revealing of the sons of God” will liberate the natural creation as a whole from entropy, death, suffering, and decay,¹ and, next, that

¹ A fall (and a resurrection) that directly affects the laws of physics raises huge questions, but unfortunately most of these will have to remain unaddressed in what follows.

this revelation of the sons of God is equivalent to our “adoption as sons” and with the “redemption of our bodies.” But what is the link between adoptive sonship and the redemption of our bodies, and how can a spiritual process like this affect the whole of creation? Along the lines suggested by my book *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, which is about reconstituting a Christian cosmology, I interpret the “revealing of the sons of God” in terms of man’s role as microcosm and mediator. Rather than dwelling on the eschatological implications of the passage, or the intriguing questions raised by the notion of a “cosmic fall,” my emphasis here will be on the call to holiness as a key to understanding Christian ethics, and therefore on a spiritual anthropology. I hope the relevance of all this to the discussion of stewardship will become clear.

Man as Microcosm

Living in Oxford makes me a bit sensitive to the meanings and use of words. So I might start by questioning the way we often fall into talking about the “environmental movement,” or about a modern concern for the “environment.” The term “environment” implies an opposition between humanity and its surroundings, which reduces nature at best to a kind of backdrop, and at worst to a complex set of raw materials, as Dr. Thompson has discussed elsewhere.² The insight that ecologists have come to in the second half of the last century runs counter to this view of nature as a mere “environment” for man. It reveals the interdependence of all living things, including man, in a world that is more a home than a house, much more than a collection of scenery, more than a collection of resources lying around for us to consume.

This is little more than a rediscovery in scientific terms of what had already been understood in previous civilizations. Our pre-industrial ancestors right up to the time of Aquinas and beyond viewed the world as an organic whole, ordered from within, possessing a sacred and spiritual value by virtue of its creation by God and the continued divine presence within it. The stars were thought to be angelic creatures, the movements of their dance helping to determine the pattern of events unfolding below. The physical elements themselves were imagined as conscious beings, participating in a cosmic intelligence.

It is quite in keeping with this ancient tradition for the Bible in the Cantic of Daniel to call upon all of creation to bless the Lord, including the sun

² Christopher J. Thompson: “We occupy a place in an ordered cosmos with a universal plan of redemption, not merely an environment” (“Beholding the Logos,” *Logos* 12, no. 3 [2009]: 43). See also Thompson’s Introduction in the present volume. As he points out, the distinction is explored in Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998).

and moon, stars of the heavens, clouds of the sky, showers and rain.³ The animals, plants, and minerals, the stars and elements, can be said to “praise” their Maker, either simply by their very existence, or else through man, who gives them a voice they do not possess in themselves. In this view, man occupies a central place in the universe, but he does so as a microcosm containing all the elements of nature, and faculties or powers corresponding to both animals and angels. Adam’s role in the cosmos is a priestly and mediatory one, radically compromised by the Fall, but restored in Christ, who by assuming human nature assumed *the whole of nature* by taking on a body.⁴

The historical processes by which Western man migrated from a spiritually ordered “cosmos” of the kind I have just described to the secular “universe” most people now take for granted have been analyzed in great depth and detail by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age*. But religious believers even today still manage to keep a foot in both realms. To take religion seriously, to participate in a religious faith, is to inhabit a cosmos, rather than just a universe. That is, unless we have begun the migration by reducing religion to a set of moral laws and customs. For it seems to me that what makes the difference between a universe and a cosmos is not morality so much as prayer. In a cosmos, prayer is the fundamental human act.

The view of man as microcosm and the universe as a sacred cosmos was given a new lease of life in modern Catholic thought by Blessed John Paul II. Philosophical personalism gave him a new language in which to express the insight that all of creation is somehow bound up with man and his destiny. And if man is bound up with creation in this way, disorder in the macrocosm may be understood in part as a reflection or projection of our own interior failure and alienation from God, as many of the ancient writers believed.⁵ In his 1984 Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance* (15), John Paul II wrote: “Since by sinning man refuses to submit to God, his internal balance is also destroyed and it is precisely within himself that

³ Dan 3:57–88, 56.

⁴ See for example Maximus the Confessor, “Ambiguum 7,” in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2003), 45–74. For Maximus all things are united in the one Logos through their *logoi*, which are the intentions of God in their behalf (combining aspects of formal and final cause).

⁵ According to the Book of Wisdom, creation “exerts itself to punish the unrighteous” (Wis 16:24). There are, of course, obvious ways in which even the most secular-minded will agree that our behavior and decisions have a massive impact on the fabric of the world. Industrial pipelines blocking migration routes, deforestation by logging companies, pollution of the oceans with plastic refuse, destruction of biodiversity, climate havoc—the litany of ecological sins and disasters could be extended indefinitely. Each of these problems has something to do with human decisions made in ignorance or greed.

contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his relationship with others and with the created world.” Thus in the Pope’s view, the original sin of Adam and Eve, precipitating us into a new state of being outside Eden, could hardly fail to affect the rest of the natural world with which we are connected, as well as our own bodies.

The Pope affirmed a mystical bond between ourselves and the rest of creation, and sought to recall us to our original mission as stewards and priests of nature, receiving the creation from God’s hand, cultivating it or making it fruitful, and giving it back to him in sacrificial worship. The healing of the world around us depends on a re-ordering and a healing of the inner world of imagination, intelligence, and will. Man was intended to be the mediator of creation, the one in whom all things connect, through whom all things are reconciled, the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15–20). This high calling is fulfilled in Christ, the new Adam, into whom we are baptized when we receive the Holy Spirit.⁶

In his encyclical on the Holy Spirit (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, 50), he puts it like this:

The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is “flesh”: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The “first-born of all creation,” becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also “flesh”—and in this reality with all “flesh,” with the whole of creation.

Pope Benedict XVI picks up Pope John Paul’s cosmic personalism in his own teaching, for example in *Caritas in Veritate*, which in unfolding the various aspects of economic and cultural development anchors the whole argument in the “centrality of the human person” (47) and the relational nature of man (53–55). For both popes, in fact, “human ecology” is inseparable from environmental ecology, because respect for nature must

⁶ As background to the present article, please see the very useful document of the International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God” (2002), available at www.vatican.va. Celia Deane-Drummond provides a useful survey of the literature in *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008). Catholic teaching on ecological responsibility was summarized in *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Publishing House, 2004), and has been consolidated further by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009).

include respect for ourselves, for our sexuality, and for human life in all its stages and manifestations:

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. (*Caritas in Veritate* 51)

Subjected in Hope

I have been speaking of man as microcosm, and as priestly mediator of creation, and of the restoration of this role in Christ. But this restoration takes place *in the midst of our fallen state*. It does not involve an immediate return to the conditions preceding our exile from Eden—even if the saints sometimes give us a glimpse of prelapsarian innocence. Christ, though without sin, adopted the condition of fallen man, and as such he was subject to pain, entropy, and death. We who come after, in the time of the Church, are living within his body and to some extent measuring out the years before his resurrection is fully revealed to all. The Book of Revelation speaks of a “new heavens and new earth” (Rv 21:1) where mourning and crying will cease, but for now there are still tears a-plenty.

In Romans 8 there are three references to “groaning”: creation groans in travail (v. 22), we groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption as sons in the Son (v. 23), and the Holy Spirit—the personification of God’s self-gift to us—groans in supplication on our behalf, since we do not know how to pray as we ought (v. 26). This word “groaning” signifies the sadness, suffering, and expectation of the whole world, its longing for liberation, and the misery of decay. Groaning expresses the tension between what we are now and what we will become, and is a measure of the distance and difference the overcoming of which is anticipated through the virtue of hope.⁷

Once again, it may help to consider the meanings of words. The author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien, in constructing a language for the Elves of Middle-earth, gives them two main words for hope.⁸ The word

⁷ It is also an expression of desire, of eros. So, for example, Maximus the Confessor quotes the prophet-king David; “*Crying out I will be satisfied when your glory appears* (Ps 16:15). And: *My soul thirsts for the strong and living God* (Ps 42:2).” (*On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, Ambiguum 7, 49.) *Deus Caritas Est*, with its analysis of the close relationship between eros and agape, could be used to explore in greater depth this aspect of “groaning.”

⁸ See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Morgoth’s Ring: The Later Silmarillion, Part One* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 320.

Amdir or “looking up” refers to optimism, the expectation that things will turn out well or get better. The assumption that the ecological crisis can be solved, that big corporations can be persuaded to change their ways, these fall under the heading of *Amdir*. The second word, *Estel*, means “trust”—trust in our deepest nature and the being of things, or in their source of being, despite the apparent victory of evils known and experienced. That, I would say, is the hope of the virtuous pagan. It is perfectly valid, and in its own way quite consoling. To these two kinds of hope we must add a third, for which there is no Elvish word. Christian hope is not psychological or metaphysical, but theological. It rests on the gift of faith. This is the hope with which Pope Benedict is mainly concerned.

In section 31 of *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict writes that while “we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day . . . these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.”

The fact is that we can struggle for a better world, we can fight for the trees and animals and defend the coral reefs, but optimism or *Amdir* alone cannot sustain us. Not only is a hope for some future generation not exactly a hope for me personally, but also the battle itself goes badly. *Estel* is better, more deeply rooted in the nature of reality, and gives a certain sense of detachment, but many ecologists are deprived by their atheistic convictions even of this natural piety of being. That is why today we see so many of them falling into bitter despair. And many of them are specifically blaming *religious hope* for keeping us enslaved all these years while the earth is being destroyed. “Hope is a way of keeping us in line,” as Derrick Jensen put it in *Orion* magazine a while ago.⁹ He thinks that resorting to hope means we have given up; that we no longer believe in our power to change things. He therefore suggests we give up on hope, turn away from fear, and act out of love alone—love for the beautiful creation that is perishing before our eyes.

He is right about love; but as Pope Benedict teaches, hope cannot be separated from love and faith (*Spe Salvi* 31):

God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives

⁹ “Beyond Hope,” *Orion* (May/June 2006). Online at www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/170.

us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect.

It is our experience of love that gives us our intimations of what it might be truly to live life to the full, and not necessarily as part of the status quo. Hope is in fact founded on love. Pope Benedict diagnoses Jensen's problem thus (*Spe Salvi* 35):

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.

In other words, the Pope reverses Jensen's conclusion. "Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere." And he is quite clear what actions are called for.

We can free our life and the world from the poisons and contaminations that could destroy the present and the future. We can uncover the sources of creation and keep them unsullied, and in this way we can make a right use of creation, which comes to us as a gift, according to its intrinsic requirements and ultimate purpose. This makes sense even if outwardly we achieve nothing or seem powerless in the face of overwhelming hostile forces.

For Pope Benedict, we do what we must and what we can here and now, even without *Amdir*, just as we try to alleviate suffering in a world where death will always win, because we have a "greater hope," a hope not in the future but in the present and in the eternity to which the present is inseparably connected, the "substance of things hoped for" (Heb 11:1, cf. *Spe Salvi* 7–9), namely the Kingdom of God which is already with us in faith.

Spe Salvi also identifies another important mistake that the ecological community is prone to make. The secular mentality responds to our state of decay and suffering by trying to overcome this weakness through technology. But technology employed without an understanding of the

world's relation to God always tends to make the situation worse. Using technology, we try to anticipate the "glorious liberty of the children of God," through medicine, drugs, surrogates, and avatars. But if we rely on technology to save the world, we end by reducing the world to a machine. As the Pope writes in *Spe Salvi* (17), the modern mistake is that our hope of redemption is placed in technological progress. It is

no longer expected from faith, but from the newly discovered link between science and praxis. It is not that faith is simply denied; rather it is displaced onto another level—that of purely private and other-worldly affairs—and at the same time it becomes somehow irrelevant for the world. This programmatic vision has determined the trajectory of modern times and it also shapes the present-day crisis of faith which is essentially a crisis of Christian hope.

Placing our faith in progress involves two components: a false idea of reason and a false idea of freedom. "The kingdom of reason . . . is expected as the new condition of the human race once it has attained total freedom," and this freedom is defined as an "overcoming of all forms of dependency." The passage from Romans 8 speaks of us as having been "subjected" in hope. The modern mentality views any subjection as oppressive and tyrannical, and it attempts to overcome subjection by technical means alone. But we are dependent by our very nature as creatures. That is why elsewhere the Pope writes, "Moving beyond the fascination that technology exerts, we must re-appropriate the true meaning of freedom, which is not an intoxication with total autonomy, but a response to the call of being, beginning with our own personal being."¹⁰ (That call of being is felt in *Estel*, but Christianity reveals the identity of being and love, so hope for us should be both deeper and stronger.)

Without religious faith and hope, environmentalism will end in fanaticism or despair. But at the same time the Pope reminds religious believers that secular environmentalists have had good reason to reject them as potential allies—for "modern Christianity, faced with the successes of science in progressively structuring the world, has to a large extent restricted its attention to the individual and his salvation. In so doing it has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize sufficiently the greatness of its task" (*Spe Salvi* 25). This restriction of Christianity to the individual level is, I take it, precisely what we now need to overcome. As Christians we have been too hasty to "limit the horizon of our hope," so that hope has indeed become a feeble-minded excuse for inaction.

¹⁰ *Caritas in Veritate*, 70.

What Do We Do?

I want to come back to the idea of the microcosm by way of philosophy, and especially ethics, since ethics deals with the way we make practical decisions. Most pragmatically minded people don't realize that they are philosophers. They may have no training and no interest in philosophy, but the way they think about the world, about themselves, about right and wrong, and about what is important to them and where their priorities lie, necessarily reflects a set of philosophical commitments. In our culture it is common to adhere unconsciously to a philosophy that is both incoherent and false. Cartesian dualism and reductionist empiricism have had effects well beyond the philosophical community. It would be nice to think that defeating these philosophical errors would have positive cultural effects on a similar scale. That is probably unrealistic. Nevertheless, by overcoming the split between soul and body we should be able to reconnect the human person with the cosmos and with the other creatures that share existence with us, rendering the ideas of man as microcosm and of bodily redemption at least intelligible. That would be no small achievement.

I think by now we have a number of good accounts of how to do this. The reason why Descartes was left needing to prove the existence of an external world, whereas the medievals were not, is that he started on the subjective side of the divide between subject and object. He reduced being to thinking. This was surely a mistake, since being is prior to the distinction. What we grasp before *I think*, before even *I am*, is that *being is*, or that "there *is* an *Is*" (as Chesterton puts it in his book on Aquinas).¹¹ It is from this fundamental intuition that medieval metaphysics unfolded, and why it constituted an ontology, a philosophy of being. Thus we can say with Étienne Gilson that "Man is not [first of all] a mind that thinks, but a being who knows other beings as true, who loves them as good,

¹¹ In chapter 7 of that book he writes: "Men of another school answer that grass is a mere green impression on the mind; and that he can be sure of nothing except the mind. They declare that he can only be conscious of his own consciousness; which happens to be the one thing that we know the child is not conscious of at all. In that sense, it would be far truer to say that there is grass and no child, than to say that there is a conscious child but no grass. St. Thomas Aquinas, suddenly intervening in this nursery quarrel, says emphatically that the child is aware of *Ens*. Long before he knows that grass is grass, or self is self, he knows that something is something. Perhaps it would be best to say very emphatically (with a blow on the table), 'There is an *Is*.' That is as much monkish credulity as St. Thomas asks of us at the start. Very few unbelievers start by asking us to believe so little. And yet, upon this sharp pin-point of reality, he rears by long logical processes that have never really been successfully overthrown, the whole cosmic system of Christendom."

and who enjoys them as beautiful.”¹² Values belong (objectively) to things that exist outside ourselves; they are rooted in being, beginning with transcendental properties such as truth, goodness, and beauty.

But we need to go one step further. Just as *Estel* alone does not reveal the identity of being and love, so the transcendental properties of being do not reveal the human self as such in its deepest reality. It is in the eyes of another that I find my own identity, just as it is perhaps the “mother’s smile,” in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s famous expression, that first awakens me to self-awareness as an infant. At the beginning of his series *Theo-Logic*, Balthasar conducts a phenomenological meditation on the concept of truth that emphasizes the relationship of subject and object in the act of consciousness. He concludes that the subject discovers being (including its own) by *receiving the object and serving it*: “only in going out of itself, in creatively serving the world, does the subject become aware of its purpose and, therefore, of its essence.”¹³ And the object can be revealed only in the space provided by the subject, in which it becomes more than it was.

Karol Wojtyła develops a similar insight in *The Acting Person*. “Since Descartes,” he writes, “knowledge about man and his world has been identified with the cognitive function. . . . And yet, in reality, does man reveal himself in thinking or, rather, in the actual enacting of his existence . . . ?” And he adds, “In fact, it is by reversing the post-Cartesian attitude toward man that we undertake our study: by approaching him through action.”¹⁴

Wojtyła believes the Transcendental Ego posited by Husserl (following Descartes) cannot be the essence of the self, the real “thinker” of the *Cogito*, for the “I” in “I think” is not revealed through the intuition of one’s own pure subjectivity, but solely through action—and even thinking is a kind of act. The future pope’s analysis of human consciousness centers around what he terms its “reflexive” function—the awareness of oneself as the subject of one’s own acts and experiences; in other words, the revelation of oneself not primarily as object or as idea, but as *actor*.¹⁵ In this reflexive function of consciousness lies the key to vertical transcendence or what he later calls the “original solitude” in which we come face to face with God, the supreme Other and source of our ultimate identity.

¹² Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 255.

¹³ H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 62.

¹⁴ Cited in Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73–77.

In other words, the mystery of who “I” am is to be solved, not by turning inwards and excluding the outer world from consideration, even provisionally, but by turning *outwards* and discovering myself in relationship.¹⁶ The self is invisible to itself and discovered only in the other, and completely only through love. The encounter with love, and the response to that encounter, is the drama of the human person through which one may be said to “enact” his existence. It is in this way that he discovers his own nature, not as a consciousness, a mind, or a ghost in a machine, but as a person. He discovers at the same time *being*, which now reveals itself as pure gift and therefore as love made concrete in the other, in the self, and in the relationship between them.

Naturally this all gives us a very different perspective on ethics. The kind of morality that goes along with Cartesian assumptions tends to be consequentialist, utilitarian, or proportionalist in form. This means that I can judge the morality of an action only by its consequences, whether likely or actual. I decide what would be a good outcome, or society decides this for me, and I choose to act in a way that will bring it about. I may myself be judged on the basis of my intentions, or on the basis of what actually results from what I do, but either way the rightness or wrongness of my action depends on its end. And indeed, one cannot deny there is something very natural and believable about this philosophy. Surely I will be judged partly on my choice of goal, as well as my prudence in reaching it. But of course the weak point, even for the pragmatist, is that I cannot ever truly predict the outcome of my actions. How far ahead must I look? This weakness is particularly obvious when we have to make decisions that affect something as complex as an ecosystem, where each component affects the others in unpredictable ways—not to mention the effects on human cultures and populations. Furthermore, since “there are no intrinsic values,” the good or evil of the end is always something of an arbitrary decision.

Alternative “deontological” theories reject the idea that the end is enough to justify the means. I believe it was Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “We will never have peace in the world until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from the means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process. Ultimately you can’t reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree.” I wrote down this quotation some years ago because it seemed to me to ring very true. This organic relationship

¹⁶ Cf. also Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (Washington, DC: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America, 1984), 86.

between means and ends is something that people understand intuitively, just as they understand that any of our actions might bring about a state of affairs quite different from the one we intended. We cannot absolutely distinguish between means and ends. If the means is itself an action, it has a moral value of its own apart from the intended outcome. We have both to decide the goal we are aiming to reach, *and* to discern whether a particular means is appropriate or organically connected with the goal, before we know how to act.

Consequentialism makes sense only in a world of constricted rationality, where the interior connectedness of things is denied in order to control them mechanically by outside forces. Here it would easy to appeal once more to Pope Benedict, and his continuing appeal to “broaden” our reason. For modern science, like modern ethics, is based on a constriction of rationality. Aristotle argued for four types of cause: final, formal, material, and efficient. Formal causality was due to the inner shaping idea or essence, and final causality to the plan or intention for which they exist and to which they are directed. But once modern science had practically eliminated any reference to interior formal principles and relationships with God, all that was left to investigate was the world of “horizontal” causes—material causality in the sense of what something is made of, and efficient causality, or what brings about a change. That is why the modern mentality has such a problem with ethical rationality, which concerns formal and especially final causality, and as such hardly lends itself to mathematical treatment or measurement.¹⁷

It cannot be denied that the restriction of reason to two of the four causes, like the forcing of water into a narrow channel, gave it enormous force. But purely at the level of sense-making, something was lost. Eventually the notion of cause became reduced to that of a constant, regular, and predictable conjunction of events lacking any deeper reason at all. The important distinction between *controlling* and *understanding* nature became increasingly blurred. The goal of science, it seemed, was to give the simplest possible account of how things actually behave without worrying about any “why.” Ironically, this reduces it once more to the task of “saving the appearances,” as it once did with the old Ptolemaic

¹⁷ The origin of the idea of the four causes seems to lie in Plato’s *Timaeus*, where they appear as the Demiurge, Matter, Forms, and the Good. Christianity traced these back to God, who as Creator is “efficient” cause of existence itself, creating materially *ex nihilo*, according to the form of his own divine ideas, for the sake of his own finality. Nevertheless the causes remain distinct, and all are necessary—just as for Aquinas, in order for an action to be good four elements are needed: the existence of the act, appropriate circumstances, what is done, and the ultimate goal or intention.

system. Perhaps we are waiting today not only for a new St. Benedict, but for a new and very different Galileo.

Formal and final causality had not, of course, disappeared from the scene altogether, but they had been, on the one hand, reduced to a set of mathematical descriptions, and, on the other, usurped by man, since it was now our own plans and designs that were to be imposed on nature through science—as Francis Bacon had made plain enough. To the extent there was held to be no intrinsic telos or end to be drawn towards or to seek, man was now forced to choose the very end itself. Kenneth Schmitz's brilliant book *The Recovery of Wonder* is partly about this development.¹⁸ It was much the same with formal causality. Lacking a natural end in God, or an interior order that determined his relation to that end, man's freedom must mean liberation from all external constraints except those he chooses for himself—even nature is now seen as an obstacle to be overcome.

What happened to ethics is bound up with all this. Consequentialism reduces human action to a choice of ends and of instrumental means to those ends, but the inner (“organic”) relationship of means to ends drops out of sight. No wonder we so often get things wrong. No wonder “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” No human mind can compute all the variables in play, nor can we even agree on the good, since it is no longer anchored in our nature. But this is where a renewed sense of cosmology, and a broadening of reason, might come in. Having recovered our sense of connectedness through the “interiority” of each action in the *Logos*, it becomes possible to make decisions not just on the basis of calculation, nor even from a sense of obligation or duty (which is another way to evade problems with consequentialism), but out of a “spirit” that is in tune with reality as a whole. In other words, the artificial boundary between ethics and spirituality has been dissolved. This does not make decisions any easier than before, but it opens our decision-making to a source of wisdom greater than ourselves.

¹⁸ *The Recovery of Wonder* deals explicitly with the change in our understanding of causality and the new sense of freedom that it brought about. The modern focus on interiority, consciousness, and subjectivity—the long road back to a metaphysical view of reality—has borne immense fruit. We may now be moving back into a cosmos, but it is a much larger cosmos than before. Not only do we have a much richer appreciation of the variety and splendor of the physical world and the richness of its history, but we have discovered in ourselves a creativity that was previously hidden from us, but which is surely part of the divine image in man (as, in their different ways, J. R. R. Tolkien and Nicholas Berdyaev both insisted).

The Ethical Microcosm

Even in ethical terms, man is a microcosm. Cosmology, anthropology, and ethics come together finally here, at the crossroads of human behavior. I find the image of *ethical microcosm* most clearly and succinctly expressed in Balthasar's "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics."¹⁹ There Christ is the "concrete categorical imperative," the "formally universal norm of ethical action" made personal and concrete as an individual man. From Christ, who carried out "the entire will of the Father (every 'ought' in the world)," we receive the "freedom to fulfil God's will and to live according to our nature as free children of the Father"—a freedom that includes a genuine creativity on our part, which is one of the points made by Prof. Schmitz in his book.²⁰ This, then, is the "revealing of the sons of God" for which nature has been yearning.

I will have to leave it pretty much at that. I have not done justice to my original intention to explore the relation between ecology and redemption, but the integration of ethics with spirituality and cosmology through the notion of an "ethical microcosm" is too big a topic for me to do more than roll into the room. I will conclude briefly by telling you what I see in it that is worthy of further reflection.

Dr. Thompson has suggested that the *nouvelle théologie* contributed to the weakness of the Catholic response to the ecological movement, since for man to lack a natural end is to lack the "proper context" for an engagement with nature. My own impression is that the *nouvelle* theologians did not deny a natural end for man so much as a *purely* natural end. They insisted that the natural end for man was, in fact, a supernatural one that could not be attained without grace. You could even put it round the other way and say that they denied a natural end *for nature*—since nature exists for man, and is oriented to him, and man is oriented to God. Nature is an extension of man's body, and as such is implicated in his divinization. It is only when this complementarity of man and nature is forgotten that the *nouvelle théologie* appears to undermine the notion of stewardship.

The essence of our existence in Christ is love, which is why for St. Thomas love or charity is the "form" of the virtues. Virtues are the powers or habits that conform us to that image and likeness of love. Thus Balthasar writes, "The distinctive ethical task laid upon man is that of

¹⁹ In Heinz Schürmann, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 77–104.

²⁰ "Thus, our 'drink' becomes a 'spirit' within us" (ibid., 81)—a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14; cf. 7:38). See, at note 14 above, the point made by Kenneth L. Schmitz.

ethicizing . . . his entire spiritual-bodily nature; success [in this task] is called virtue.”²¹ In the simplest terms, I take this to mean that it is more important than codifying a list of rights belonging to nature or to animals, and then legislating to enforce them, to become the kind of people who are never cruel to animals or needlessly destructive. Laws are clearly necessary, but we at least should know that they will not succeed in solving anything (no matter how rigorously they are enforced) if we do not also acquire virtue in ourselves.

The portrait of the virtuous, which is also the portrait of Jesus and of the restored image of man in the Blessed Virgin Mary, is given for all time in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness (we remember the “groaning” of creation), the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Thus the one-sided Kantian emphasis on moral law may be transcended by integrating the notion of duty within an anthropology, an understanding of the human being called to holiness in the image and likeness of God. We must act in certain ways not because we are ordered to do so by a divine legislator, but because we are yearning to unite ourselves with the divine Beloved. This anthropology is “nuptial” (to use John Paul II’s expression). The purpose of history, you might say, is to bring about the *liturgical consummation of cosmology*, which the Book of Revelation describes as the “wedding feast of the Lamb.”

Another way of putting this is that the stewardship of creation is nothing less than the service of Christ. The world is a kind of monstrance, or, better, an altar and a sacrament through which we become participants in the divine nature. Viewed in this way, the Mass or Divine Liturgy becomes a kind of “school of stewardship,” in which we learn the correct relationship of all things, and the right manner of behaving towards each other and towards the elements of creation.

Therefore the children of God are revealed in a life of holiness, which is a life where love has become tangible. The sign of love is not the creeds we adhere to, or the ideas we carry in our heads, but the spirit in which we behave towards each other and the world. The true liturgy and Eucharist begin where philosophy begins, in amazement and gratitude, in praise for the sheer existence of so much beauty, so much actuality. Forests and mountains, deserts and stars, animals, plants and insects are here and gone in a day, and their existence is fraught with sorrow, but God made them. In our obscure desire to unite ourselves with the Giver, to find the source and thank him, somehow, for the community of being,

²¹ Schürmann, Ratzinger, and Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, 98.

we begin to recall the reason we were made, and to play our part in the redemption of the world. The Holy Spirit prays within us, since we do not know how to pray, and groans for us in supplication, since we do not know what to ask. N V