

Metaphysical Realism as the Foundation of Environmental Stewardship and Economic Development

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“For the creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the sons of God . . .”

—Romans 8:19

Introduction

CURRENT POLICY debates concerning the preservation of the natural environment are complicated by the often unspoken recognition that the stakes include the economic prosperity we have all come to expect as almost a natural right of human persons. Those who warn of an impending ecological disaster argue that the future of the planet relies on our taking drastic measures to respond to the reality of global warming and other alarming theories. This group seems unfazed by the effect those measures might have on our economic life. On the other hand, there are those who seem relatively unconcerned that the more or less unbridled pursuit of material wealth in the West has quite likely compromised the health of our planet and our future as its residents.¹ Their argument reflects the notion that economic freedom and the human impulse to create and spread material prosperity are essential aspects of human society and cannot be sacrificed to as yet unproven scientific speculation.

¹ See Pope Benedict on this: Zenit, October 23, 2009. The Pope makes a call for “intergenerational justice” and actions of solidarity with the world’s future generations, as they are also entitled to enjoy the beauty of creation. Found at: www.zenit.org/article-27308?l=english

The tension between these two apparently irreconcilable positions was quite apparent at the U.N.-sponsored climate talks in Copenhagen at the end of 2009. By all accounts, the conference was plagued from the start by disputes and distrust between the industrialized nations and the so-called “developing” countries, the latter eager to benefit from the penalties the richer nations will have to pay for their “unrestricted exploitation” of the natural resources of the planet. Each side blamed the other for failing to take the necessary actions to tackle climate change, while the poorer nations accused the richer ones of a kind of “environmental colonialism,” that is, an attempt to restrict poor and emerging economies from industrializing at their own pace.²

Perhaps even more revealing was an opinion poll carried out in early December 2009 by the Nielsen Company and the Oxford University Institute of Climate Change. Their annual survey suggested that world concern about climate change has fallen in the past two years; the study showed that the decline in worry about the environment was correlated with the global economic slowdown, in particular in North America.³ It appears we are concerned about the environment—but only if the solutions can guarantee the preservation of our standard of living.

It seems evident that this tension is at least one of the forces that have held back any large-scale collective action on what is now a very public concern for the environment. The dilemma is particularly apparent—and potentially tragic—in certain developing countries, which argue, for example, that they have the right to cut down their rain forests in order to insure a brighter economic future for their citizens. The attempt to suggest or even impose policy guidelines on them to care for the environment is seen more as an attempt to rob them of their right to economic development than as any real concern for the planet. At least on the surface of things, there does seem to be a potentially intractable conflict between the needs of the earth and the needs of human persons to pursue their own flourishing—or, at least—for all of humanity to enjoy the material standard of living that characterizes the lives of those who happen to be residents of a developed nation. While surely it would

² The African delegation walked out of the talks when it appeared as though the developed countries were extending this new “colonialism” by refusing to provide financial aid to the poorer countries to help them adapt to climate change. See news.globaltv.com/. For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, see Robert H. Nelson, “Environmental Colonialism: Saving Africa from Africans,” *The Independent Review* 8, no. 1 (2003): 65–85.

³ See blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global/global-survey-concern-for-climate-change-cools-off/.

not be sensible to continue to degrade the health of the planet in order to satisfy shorter-term expectations for profit or consumer products, neither is it a reflection of Christian charity to refuse a poverty-stricken father in Brazil a chance at a better life for him and his family.

How do we extract ourselves from this potentially fatal impasse? Clearly the situation calls for a realistic assessment of what is at stake and of what can be done. But at the heart of this essay is the question of what sort of “realism” will help us to navigate truly unknown terrain.

Within the philosophical framework of the Catholic intellectual tradition, realism is, in the first place, a philosophical and theological stance toward the intelligibility of the created order. In fact, the position affirms the view that the human knower quite literally participates in the divine creation through his capacity to recognize and cognize both the essential nature of created things and the fact of their existence. In the words of philosopher Josef Pieper, the world can be known because it has already been creatively thought by God. Indeed, according to Pieper, it is the doctrine of creation that provides the theological undercurrent to the philosophical realism of St. Thomas Aquinas.

My essay will explore this epistemological position as the foundation of both environmental stewardship and economic activity. We shall see that the historical tension between these two important human concerns (whatever the outcome of current scientific studies) cannot be resolved without understanding that their origins are the same; they both issue from man’s place in the order of creation and his capacity to grasp the good inherent in it.

We must first establish the foundations of metaphysical realism and locate the human person within the cosmic scheme. Here I will argue that man does not inhabit an environment, but a created order.⁴ Thus, his responsibility toward creation issues from his place in it as a rational creature, an entity that is a unity of body and soul. Second, I will show that man also has a claim on creation, derived from the fact that he has no alternative but to use the goods of creation in order to pursue his own final end. Third, I will explore the implications of this account for human activity, both our knowing and our movement, our work in the world. I will show that the metaphysical context for human knowing and action—the reality that makes any of it possible at all—is creation itself.

I will argue, in conclusion, that the resolution of the dilemma we are investigating here will be found in a proper understanding of human

⁴ I am indebted for this insight to Dr. Christopher Thompson. See Thompson, “Beholding the Logos: The Church, the Environment, and the Meaning of Man,” *Logos* 12, no. 3 (2009): 39.

action, that is, human work, as a form of participation in the divine dominion over creation. I will conclude with some discussion of the concrete implications of this argument and some suggested next steps.

What Sort of Realism?

It has been widely reported that President Barack Obama points to the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr as a singularly important influence in his intellectual development, sparking a renewed public interest in Niebuhr's approach to the many complex problems we face as a nation.⁵ In Niebuhr's brand of realism, the reality in question is not a metaphysical one but the "multiplicity of forces that drive the decisions that people actually make in situations of political choice."⁶

Niebuhr's realism was born out of a quite legitimate concern to confront the "illusions about social realities" displayed by the idealists of his day. He argued that any situation always calls for careful attention to the "factions and forces" bringing pressure to bear on it, that it is necessary to prescind from any obsessive concern about the precise meaning of the good—or at least the ideal—to be achieved and to focus instead on what can be accomplished given the agendas of the various constituencies involved.

Now, as interesting and influential as Niebuhr's work has been—and as noble as his project was—it seems equally undeniable that he recommends sidestepping the question of the moral good in order to focus on the question of what sort of solution will satisfy the conflicting demands of those with a stake in the outcome. For Niebuhr, to be "realistic" is to take all the relevant "realities" into account; Christian realism then becomes a kind of political realism, a form of pragmatism in which one's moral stances take second place to the wish to achieve at least some measure of the good one seeks to accomplish.⁷

If we are, in fact, on the brink of destruction, if it is true that the polar ice caps really are melting because of destructive human activity, inadvertent or otherwise, would the realism of Niebuhr help? I must answer no, at least not in the first analysis. For the reason we are in this situation is only secondarily a scientific or political problem. In the first place, it is philosophical and theological; it issues from the well-documented, almost commonplace recognition that the contemporary person suffers from a

⁵ Journalist and commentator David Brooks was the first to bring this to light. See David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times*, April 26, 2007.

⁶ Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–8.

virtually intractable myopia regarding the real purposes of human life and man's final end. As Lynn White stated in his famous, if problematic, 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."⁸ No responsible person can ignore the evidence that we display an almost insatiable appetite for more and more "stuff," goods as well as services, that serve merely as substitutes for the real desires of the human heart. Nor can we overlook our refusal to grasp that our obsession with technology and the power it brings has led us to plant the seeds of our own potential destruction. As the Catholic Church states so profoundly in *Gaudium et Spes*, we really must ask, "What is the meaning and value of all this feverish activity? How should all these things be used?"⁹

I hope to show that the answers to these penetrating questions will be found by returning to the thought of Aquinas and recovering his metaphysical achievement for an issue of enormous importance for our contemporary culture—and for our children.

Metaphysical Realism, the Human Person, and the Order of Creation

Metaphysical realism is grounded in a particular view of the relationship between man and the created order. In order to grasp the significance and meaning of this philosophical position for our question, we must begin with a fundamental proposition: that it is an error to think of the human person as inhabiting an environment. Within the context of the Catholic theological tradition, "the human person does not inhabit an environment; the human person inhabits a world, a created cosmos."¹⁰ Unless this is grasped at the outset of our inquiry, our understanding of ourselves and of our relationship to the world we live in will be distorted, our discoveries off the mark. The order of creation provides a sort of spine or background around which all the elements of this investigation orbit and ultimately find a place.

Secondly, metaphysical realism affirms the view that the human knower quite literally participates in the divine creation through his capacity to recognize and cognize both the essential nature of created things and the fact of their existence. Thus, it cannot be understood apart from the philosophy of being that provides the context for a realist

⁸ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* (1967): 155.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 33, no. 1

¹⁰ Thompson, "Beholding the Logos," 39.

understanding of the reality in which we live: except for God, all else is creature. As Josef Pieper argues, this notion of creation, though mostly implicit in Aquinas and often left unexpressed, determines and characterizes the interior structure of *nearly all* the basic concepts in St. Thomas's philosophy of Being.¹¹ It also provides the basis upon which we can claim any true knowledge of reality. Let us pause here to consider the outlines of the doctrine.

Aquinas understands that everything in the universe is either Creator or *creatura* and that all existing being proceeds from God as its efficient, formal, and final cause. First, all *creatura* exist because they participate in the being of God, whose being is alone necessary and whose perfection is the cause of all perfections; the being of the *creatura* does not subsist on its own but through participation in the being of God.¹² Second, *creatura* receive not only their existence from God, but also their very nature from God, in both its material and its formal sense. Their determinate nature or form originates in the divine wisdom as its first principle; God is the first exemplar cause of all things.¹³ Before they are *creatura*, all things are first in the mind of God. Finally, this exemplar is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness, toward which all *creatura* are ordered and toward which they move.¹⁴ In short, as Aquinas states: "there must exist in the divine mind a form to the likeness of which the world was made."¹⁵ Creation itself is a thought, an idea, an exemplar in the mind of God.¹⁶

It is this reality that grounds the capacity of human persons to know and to know truly. Thomist epistemology reflects a "magnificent harmony between the intellect and the world, which arises from the fact that the human intellect, by its very nature, knows the world as it is."¹⁷ In terms of human anthropology, this harmony is made possible by the union of the rational soul with the materiality of the body and the capacity of the human intellect to grasp the immaterial form of the object of knowledge, without leaving the concrete particular out of the picture. As Aquinas

¹¹ Josef Pieper, "The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *The Silence of St. Thomas* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 48.

¹² Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 44, a. 1.

¹³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 44, a. 3. "And these ideas, though multiplied by their relations to things, in reality are not apart from the divine essence, according as the likeness to that essence can be shared diversely by different things. In this manner therefore God Himself is the first exemplar of all things."

¹⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 44, a. 5.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 15, a. 1.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 44, a. 3.

¹⁷ Frederick Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1956), 43.

demonstrates, to abstract the intelligible species from the phantasm is a function of the power of the active intellect which enables us to “disregard the conditions of individuality, and to take into our consideration the specific nature” that informs the passive intellect.¹⁸ Thus, knowledge is not merely of the particular but of the universal, extending beyond this or that instance to all things sharing the same nature.

It is because of this that the human intellect can be said to possess the potency to grasp the actual nature of the *res*, of the thing in itself. This claim can sound surprising to modern ears; the proof is found, not in a more complete account of the dynamism of human knowing, but in a deeper understanding of the object of knowledge itself, those entities that constitute the created order. As mentioned already, in Aquinas’s framework, nothing exists which is not *creatura* except the Creator. It is this very *createdness* that determines entirely and all-pervasively the inner structure of the creature, “not merely soul and spirit but also the visible world.”¹⁹ And the fact that all *creatura* possess this inner structure is what makes it possible for man to know them; things are knowable because they have been created, that is, given their nature by an all-knowing Creator God.

Though, again according to Josef Pieper, it has been virtually unnoticed in textbook interpretations of Aquinas that this undercurrent permeates Aquinas’s entire philosophy of being. His rendering of the classical ontological doctrine of the West cannot be fully grasped without it. Propositions such as “all that exists is good,” or “all that exists is true,” indeed the significance of the transcendental concepts in general, lose their full meaning without reference to the fact that these statements “do not refer to a neutral being that simply exists but formally to Being as *creatura*.”²⁰ It is only when the notion of creation is our starting point that we can grasp St. Thomas’s doctrine of truth and the aspect of particular interest to us here, the ontological truth embedded in the things of creation.

Now, God’s knowledge is creative, man’s knowledge is non-creative and only qualifies as real knowledge when it conforms to reality. In between them is the structure of all reality as a system in which the archetypes and the copies are both embraced. Here is the concept of measure—the *mensura*—something on the one hand given and on the

¹⁸ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 85, a. 1, ad 4.

¹⁹ Pieper, “The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48. These are the notions that can be predicated of being *qua* being, and they define the entire arc of being from Creator to creature; they include *res* or “thingness,” unity, identity, truth, goodness, and (according to some) beauty.

one hand received. Man's mind does not give measure except with regard to artifacts—*res artificiales*. It is God's knowing, the reality of the object in the divine wisdom, that gives us the measure of all things knowable.²¹

There is an ontological precedence at work between these two concepts of the known. First these things are created, brought into being by God. This creative fashioning of things by God is what makes it possible for them to be known by men. The former brings forth the latter and it is God's light hidden in the nature of things that illuminates reality and makes it intelligible and knowable by man. We can know *creatura* because we are *creatura*.

[This] signifies that things can be known by us because God has creatively thought them; *as* creatively thought by God, things have not only their *own* nature ("for themselves alone"); but *as* creatively thought by God, things have also a reality "for us."²²

This is the core of the metaphysical realism espoused by Aquinas. In contrast to the realism of Niebuhr, the reality to which it refers is the nature of the created order as actualized, which is, in virtue of its existence, both true and good. Metaphysical realism reveals that the true as an object of knowledge and the good as an object of desire both issue from the same created reality. We will return to this idea in a moment.

Now, there are two implications of this doctrine. First, it is quite literally true that all creatures exist in virtue of this participation in God as first cause. Thus each is endowed with a certain ontological status that issues from the fact that they are held in existence by God, they receive their formal *quiddity* from God, and they are ordered somehow to God. This metaphysical reality reveals that the created order, and the diversity of creatures that it comprises, have a claim on us that cannot be readily ignored or dismissed. Let me state the obvious: though man occupies a unique position within this hierarchy, since he is at the meeting place of the worlds of matter and spirit and is possessed of a rational soul and the powers of intellection (a power that permits him to grasp the nature of the created entity), his status as a creature *qua creature* is in a sense equivalent to any other *creatura*. Like all other *creatura*, he is a creature of God, held in existence by God, receiving his formal quiddity from God, and ordered to God. Further, as Aquinas tells us, since every being is God's creature, and since all created perfections are in God²³—that is, participate in the

²¹ Pieper, "The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas," 55.

²² Ibid.

²³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 2.

essence of God which is existence itself—and since being and goodness are convertible,²⁴ every being, *qua* being, is good.

Secondly, man's unique status within the hierarchy does not free him from seeing the unity, truth, and goodness in all the rest of creation. In fact, on the contrary, his very nature as the only creature endowed with reason, makes him *responsible* for seeing it. Thus the created order places a very clear demand on him, a demand intimately related to his capacity to know—the demand that he recognize the world around him for what it is: evidence of God's creative activity in the world that comprises *creatura* who, just like him, participate in God's own essence. Though intuitively he may grasp that, unlike himself, other *creatura* reflect merely a *trace* of the divine likeness, whereas he reflects its very image,²⁵ he nonetheless has no real alternative in an absolute sense but to adopt an attitude of responsibility toward creation.

This is, if you will, a caveat that must be taken into account in any attempt to justify the exigencies of the economic life of any community or nation. In a sense, this first set of propositions is an attempt to translate the concerns of the environmentalists into philosophical terms that might demonstrate that they actually reflect a metaphysical reality affirmed by the Catholic Christian tradition. At this point we can state that any adequate account of the economic exigencies of the situation must provide for this reality.

Man's Right to the Goods of Creation

There is a second fundamental proposition, one that issues from man's very place in the created order. This second proposition can be said to begin in a more phenomenological analysis, that is, it is observable aside from any metaphysical account or any derivation of philosophical categories, or for that matter, scientific theories. Though Aquinas relies on it in his proof that the soul is properly united to the body, an analysis to which I will return in a moment, it is referred to in certain circles as "the human fact" and provides both an empirical basis for the metaphysical truths it reflects and an objective starting place for scientific inquiry as well.²⁶

²⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1. Aquinas actually states that though goodness and being are really the same, the good is predicated of a thing somewhat differently than being. Being corresponds to what something actually is, and thus it correlates to potentiality. Goodness signifies a perfection which is desirable, and a thing may possess it simply or relatively according to the extent to which it is actualized (has being).

²⁵ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 93, a. 6.

²⁶ M. A. Krapiec, O.P., *I-Man* (New Britain, CT: Mariel Publications, 1983), 29–31. Indeed, it would seem that, for the most part, science itself has tended to overlook

It is a given within the Catholic philosophical tradition that the human person is a *rational* animal. And, not without justification, much of our deliberation has focused on the rational principle that defines the human soul and the nature of that operation. But there is another aspect of this definition, perhaps a trifle ignored, and that is to ask first—not about man’s rationality or his soul—but to pose a question closer to us, more immediately available to our senses: that is, what sort of *animal* is he?

Let’s take a look. Man is, in fact, the only creature in the animal kingdom that clearly is *not* suited to his environment. He does not have claws that would permit him easily to kill his prey with his bare hands. He does not have a prominent snout equipped with fangs that would allow him to attack and devour his prey that way. He does not have a highly developed sense of smell that would help him to find food or to sense immediately that the food he has spotted will likely make him sick or could even lead to his death. In order to accommodate his own limited capacity for mastication and the requirements of his digestive system, he needs to cook the meat, grind and bake the wheat, boil the corn. He does not have fur that might protect him from the elements, and thus he has no choice but to construct shelters, make clothing, and plant, harvest, and store food in anticipation of the time when there will be none to be had. He simply must think ahead, plan, anticipate. In short, it is a good thing that man has the capacity for reason, because without it he would not have survived.

It is man alone who is able to transcend the whole of nature and the animal world; it is man alone who has survived the difficulties of the struggle with nature. Out of necessity, he has fashioned for himself “an artificial niche in the form of homes, estates, cities and everything which is associated with urban culture.”²⁷ In fact, everything we refer to as culture was and is the achievement of man’s reason. Driven in part by the fact that the human person is the only creature who is capable of genuine love and who contemplates his own death, he operates in a world of meaning, of hope, and of faith. Culture is ultimately the result of man’s search for meaning; it will reflect his conclusions in that regard. But it originates in the empirical fact that he must create his own environment in order to reach his own final end.

Now, Aquinas himself refers to this “human fact,” in his argument that the human soul is fittingly united to the human body. How could it be right, says the objector, that that most perfect of souls, the human soul,

this pre-scientific human fact and thus has failed to account adequately for the place of the human person in the cosmic scheme.

²⁷ Krapiec, *I-Man*, 31.

should be united to so imperfect a body? After all, the bodies of other animals are naturally provided with covering instead of clothes, with hoofs instead of shoes, with claws, with teeth, with horns. But the human body is deprived of such protections. This means we must conclude that the soul is not properly united with the human body, does it not?

On the contrary, says Aquinas, man's protection is found through the operation of his reason and the work of his hands, both of which make it possible for him to create for himself instruments of an infinite variety, for any number of purposes. Man's protection is of his own making. This is possible because the intellectual soul has the power to comprehend universals, a power that extends to the infinite, a power that cannot be limited to fixed notions or means, or to particulars. Man can survive because the proper operation of man *qua* man is to understand—and it is in virtue of this that he surpasses all other animals.²⁸ It is this power that is to guide his desires and the work of his hands; the body is for the sake of the soul's movement toward God.

So here we have the other half of our dilemma—rendered, we hope, intelligible in philosophical terms. This set of propositions reveals the reasons why man must work and why he must use the goods of creation to insure his own survival. This is foundational to my inquiry, because it must be understood that the ecological crisis (assuming there is one) cannot be resolved by ignoring the fact that human persons have a natural right to the use of the goods of creation. The human person does not exist apart from nature; he belongs to it and it belongs to him in virtue of his place within it as creature. Any adequate account of our responsibility to the created order also must provide for this reality.

So, the facts before us are twofold: creation has a claim on us and we have a claim on it. Where does justice lie in this schema? Again, what sort of “realism” will help us to settle the conflict?

The Human Person, the Good, and the Meaning of Work

In what follows, I will offer a third set of propositions, which I believe provides a basis for a resolution to this tension, at least in philosophical and theological terms. Under consideration in this section of the essay is the third leg of my argument; we must now grasp what it is that he knows when he knows truly and how that permits him to act for his own good in his movement back toward God. Here we will introduce the meaning of the good and its relationship to human work. We will see that the meaning of human work is grounded also in these metaphysical realities

²⁸ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1.

and that man's work is itself a participation in God's dominion over the created order. Thus, properly understood and carried out, man's work is ordered toward the redemption of creation in its own return to God. Without man's use of the goods of creation, the movement of those goods toward their own final end would (in a sense) be truncated—for, unlike man who is made for his own sake, the goods of creation are made for the sake of something else.²⁹

We have seen that the measure of man's knowledge is determined by its adequation to the exemplar in the mind of God. Things are knowable because they are created, but they are true because they have been creatively thought. And the truth of man's knowledge is measured by the extent of its identity with the thing as it is in itself, as caused by the mind of God. But, as St. Thomas demonstrates, since every created entity has actuality and is in some way perfect, every being *qua* being is good.³⁰ Being and the good are convertible, and the good is understood as that which not only "is" but also is in some way desirable.³¹

Now the good itself is a multivalent notion. Aquinas tells us that from the higher and more universal point of view, the good has three aspects: the good as virtuous, the good as useful, and the good as pleasurable. Everything is good so far as it is desirable and it is the term or end toward which the appetite moves. But this end can present itself in three ways. It can be an end that is absolute in that it is desired for its own sake, as, for example, the Beatific Vision, or the natural desire to live. This is the good in its virtuous aspect. Or, it can be relative to some other end, that is, a means to an end, like food which is taken in order to sustain life. This is the good as useful. Finally, it can be an end in which the appetite comes to rest in the thing desired. This is the good as pleasant.³²

But the good is not an object of desire unless the intellect first grasps it as an object of knowledge; appetite follows apprehension.³³ As Aquinas demonstrates, it is not the case that a man understands because he is moved by his intellect; he is moved by his intellect because he understands.³⁴ Thus the first protection provided the human person in his natural effort to create a niche for himself, an environment in which he

²⁹ This requires qualification. As we will see in a moment, that "something else" is not only its utility in the material sense. The goods of creation are also goods that can be and should be left alone for the sake of beauty, as an object of contemplation, or to insure the future sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants.

³⁰ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 3.

³¹ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1.

³² Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 6.

³³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 79, a. 1, ad 2.

³⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1.

can pursue his own final end, is not precisely his *desire* for the good; nor is it his capacity to create with his hands; but it is his *intellectual* capacity to grasp the good contained within the essence and existence of creation. His natural inclination toward the truth, a feature predicated of the mind, is prior to and orders the natural inclination of his will toward the good.

Thus the good as known in its virtuous aspect is ontologically and logically prior to its usefulness and its pleasure-ableness. For the object of knowledge and of desire is not merely useful or pleasurable. A thing is not good because it is useful; it is useful because it is good. And it is good because it has being. The goodness of a thing includes its usefulness, but only in a secondary sense, as when it is grasped as a means toward something else. In the first place, and in its virtuous meaning, the goodness of the *creatura* is identified with the final end toward which the appetite of the *creatura* moves, and the thing is desired, not as a means toward something else, but for its own sake.³⁵

Now, the “unfailing order” we observe in nature as a whole is proof that it is being governed.³⁶ This order issues from the observable reality that every created entity has its own end toward which it is ordered; its ultimate perfection consists in the attainment of that final end.³⁷ Thus, inherent in the nature of created beings is a “natural necessity” that directs them toward that end, revealing the divine governance of creation and the Divine Providence that oversees all things. Man’s use of the goods of creation cannot contravene this order, but must participate with it.³⁸

Here, finally, is the precise claim that creation has on us—if we are to participate rightly within this order, we must understand that our place is to serve as ministers of God’s dominion over creation by insuring that the goods of creation reach their own proper end. We exercise dominion rightly only to the extent that our governance is a reflection of God’s. This is our privilege and our gift, for “it is a greater perfection for a thing to be good in itself *and also* the cause of goodness in others.”³⁹ Man’s place in the created order calls him to be the agent that enables other *creatura* to realize their own final end. When a man works to secure his own

³⁵ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 6.

³⁶ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 103, a. 1.

³⁷ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 103, a. 1.

³⁸ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 103, a. 1, ad 3.

³⁹ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 103, a. 6. I am indebted for this insight to Matthew Cuddeback of Providence College, who pointed to the relevance of the category of Divine Governance during his presentation, “John Paul II and Thomas Aquinas on Man’s Participated Dominion of the Earth,” at the conference “Renewing the Face of the Earth: the Church and the Order of Creation,” St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, October 20–31, 2009.

livelihood, thereby exercising his dominion over the goods of the earth, his action is a reflection of the work of the Creator. But if this activity is to be true to its meaning, it must correspond to God's design. That is, he must be God's minister, the proximate cause of the goods of creation attaining to their own final end. And here we come to the relationship of this analysis to the deeper meaning of human work, the means by which man may pursue his own flourishing.

As Blessed John Paul II tells us in his encyclical on human work, *Laborem Exercens*, "Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe."⁴⁰ The Holy Father points out that God's instruction to Adam and Eve at Genesis 1:26, to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it," that is, to work, is prior to the Fall, when they still existed in a state of original innocence. Work can be understood, therefore, not as punishment for sin but as "a fundamental dimension of human existence," an essential characteristic of human nature. Human work itself is a reflection of man's place in the created order; it is one of the ways that man sets about realizing his final end. Indeed, John Paul II argues that it is through his work that man becomes who he is meant to be, and work is thus a sacred act.⁴¹

But this work has this meaning only when it is ordered toward man's final end and the end of all creation; only then can he be said to reflect God's command to have dominion over all the goods of the earth. The significance of this proposition is stated well in *Gaudium et Spes* 34:

Created in God's image, man was commissioned to subdue the earth and all it contains, to rule the world in justice and holiness, and, recognizing God as the creator of all things, to refer himself and the totality of things to God so that with everything subject to God, the divine name would be glorified in all the earth.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 4.

⁴¹ Ibid. 6. It is very interesting to note that many of these ideas were articulated beautifully by those involved in the Catholic Land Movement, an early twentieth-century effort to respond to the excesses of the Industrial Revolution; it is the origin of the intellectual and economic school of thought known as "Distributism." The movement began in 1929 in Scotland and spread to the rest of Great Britain. See *Flee to the Fields: The Founding Papers of the Catholic Land Movement* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2003) (originally published in 1934), especially George Maxwell's "The Reconstruction of the Crafts," 119–29. See also the essay by Matthew Whelan in this present volume (pages 253–77), "Land, Economy, and the Measure of Christ: The Catholic Agrarianism of Vincent McNabb, O.P."

When a man works to obtain something, to use the goods of creation, his action ensues from the movement of his will. But there is a movement prior to that, the movement of the intellect. Thus the notion of property, an economic category, originates in a metaphysical one: the cognitive grasp of the potency inherent in a natural resource, something which further depends upon the divinely conferred capacity of the human person to cognize the good and to act to realize that potential in accord with his nature. The grasp of this potency is accompanied by a prior appreciation of the final end proper to the object in question. This capacity is not only to see the *usefulness* of creation, that is, its utility; it includes and requires a concomitant grasp of the unity, truth, goodness, and yes, beauty, of creation and our responsibility as stewards of it. The creation of property begins, not with the movement of the appetite, that is, a simple and thoughtless “I want that.” Nor does it begin, as John Locke famously argued, with labor, that is, with the work of our hands. There is a human act prior to both of these movements when the human person grasps the intelligibility of a created good, its virtue, within which its usefulness and its pleurability are nested.

The resolution of the tension between environmental stewardship and the economic life of the community can be expressed in metaphysical terms as the relationship between the intelligibility of the created order and the capacity of the human person to see, not merely the utility of *creatura*, but the full truth and the goodness of diversity of beings that constitute the created order. Human persons have a natural right to make use of the goods of creation. But we do not have the right to use them up, for they are not ours in any absolute sense to begin with. They quite literally belong to God—and so do we. The thrust of all creation is toward its own final end, and man fully occupies his place in the created order only when he recognizes both his right and his responsibility toward it as he makes use of the goods of creation in order to realize his own final end. And this recognition cannot be assured without reflecting the image of God, not only in working, but in resting.

Life comprises not only action but also rest and contemplation. Indeed, work and leisure are said to be the two fundamental rhythms of human life.⁴² In this regard, we cannot overlook the third and final aspect of the good, the good as pleasant, for it is here that we will find the antidote to the intellectual blindness of modern man, that which would

⁴² Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press: 1998), 6–7. See also Michael Naughton, “Leisure as the Basis of Work,” in *Values, Work, Education: The Meanings of Work*, ed. Samuel M. Natale and Brian M. Rothschild (New York: Rodopi Press, 1995), 53.

renew his vision of reality and his relationship to it. The good as pleasant is that toward which the appetite moves in order to find rest. The goods of creation have their own final end which we must cognize; they have their uses, which we can exercise in order to insure human flourishing. But they are also a source of comfort, of beauty, and of pleasure, in which we may rest. The creation is also a gift to us to *behold*, and, in fact, it is in this aspect that man apprehends the full measure of its reality and its goodness. It is only man who lives in a cosmos, it is only man who can apprehend and appreciate its meaning. It is when he fails to grasp the good in this aspect that he falls into the trap laid for him by the serpent in the garden: he forgets to pause before its mystery. It becomes merely an object whose significance is only found in its utility.

In his profound reflection on the meaning of Sabbath, *Dies Domini*, John Paul II points out that the decree to honor the Sabbath, "Remember the Sabbath day in order to keep it holy," found at Exodus 20:8, has a very distinct meaning: before decreeing that something be *done*, the commandment urges that something be *remembered*. Pope John Paul sees this as

a call to awaken remembrance of the grand and fundamental work of God which is creation, a remembrance which must inspire the entire religious life of man and then fill the day on which man is called to *rest*. Rest therefore acquires a sacred value: the faithful are called to rest not only *as* God rested, but to rest *in* the Lord, bringing the entire creation to him, in praise and thanksgiving, intimate as a child and friendly as a spouse.⁴³

Pope John Paul reminds us that to keep the Sabbath "holy" is to remember that God is not the God of one day alone, but the God of time and space itself, of all the days of humanity. The story of creation, when considered in its entirety, reveals that "every reality, without exception, must be referred back to God."⁴⁴

Up until this point, I have tried articulate a reasoned account of the claims at work in man's relationship to creation. But here I offer the humble observation that unless modern man learns to pause before its *mystery*, to remember himself and the contingency of his own existence, no purely intellectual description or political resolution will help us to "renew the face of the earth." After all, at Genesis 2:15, Adam is put in the garden to "till it and keep it," not to strip it of its fertile beauty. We still have a natural right to till the garden, but only if we also "keep" it.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, 16. Again, I am indebted to Matthew Cuddeback for this reference.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

Once again, the full import of this stance can be better understood by returning to the thought of Aquinas, who argues that the intelligibility of the created order cannot be fully exhausted by a finite mind. That things are knowable does not necessarily translate into their being completely and absolutely known by man. Things are *creatura* and, as such, have their source in the “boundless radiance of Divine Knowledge.”⁴⁵ All of creation points toward the infinite; the human mind, though capable of seeing into the nature of things, can never wholly plumb their depths.

We must come to accept that, if we are to work as God “works,” our efforts will have to begin with an act of remembrance, the recognition that we do not comprehend fully our own origins or that of other *creatura* in the Creator. We cannot reduce creation to what we can either know or use, but must—first and always—“behold” its goodness in resting before it in the act of worship. Economic development or other forms of activity in the economic sphere, like any human endeavor, must be grounded in an acknowledgment of our place within the created order. Perhaps we could learn to bring to our work the “contemplative gaze” that the Holy Father says characterizes the Divine rest on the seventh day: an attitude that allows one to rest in the beauty of what has already been achieved, rather than always seeking new accomplishments.⁴⁶

Now we know that the highest form of leisure is worship, and the pinnacle of our worship is our active participation in Holy Mass, at the Eucharist. We think of our celebration there as something separate from our working lives—but is it? Perhaps it is no accident that when the priest prepares the gifts to be offered in the consecration, he prays:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.

During the Middle Ages—when the whole town was Catholic and everyone attended Sunday Mass—the bread and wine that was used at the consecration was, quite literally, the result of the labor of those participating. This was before the days when someone was in the business of manufacturing those little hosts, before the practice of purchasing wine from a merchant. The townspeople brought their bread and wine to a little window at the back of the church as their contribution to the celebration. It was these simple gifts that became the Body and Blood of Christ at the Consecration.

⁴⁵ Josef Pieper, “The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 63.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, 11.

It is a bit harder to see now, since the fruits of our labor usually come in the form of currency. But, in a sense, what is offered at Mass still is our work—in the form of bread and wine. It is our work that is transformed into the body and blood of Christ. It is our work that becomes the sacrifice. This work is not just the money we make, or the objects we produce, or even the people we serve—it is ourselves, our becoming, our own joining of ourselves to Christ on the Cross through the work that we do. John Paul II tells us that work, rightly understood, calls for an inner effort on the part of the human spirit, guided by faith, hope, and charity, and it can itself enter into the salvation process “on a par with the other ordinary yet particularly important components of its texture.”⁴⁷ Work is not merely an economic reality, what we do to pay the bills and put our children through college. It is the way in which we participate in the ongoing creation and redemption of the world. It is one of the means by which we become that most excellent person that God had in mind when we were created. It is one of the ways we reach our final end. And, in the sacrifice on the altar, it is our work, our participation in the governance of the world, that is joined with the sacrifice of Christ. We must be sure to make it worthy of such a sacred offering. Economic development is necessary for human flourishing and a legitimate human pursuit. But it cannot be a truly human endeavor unless its aim is not to destroy creation, but to preserve it—as any good steward of another’s property would seek to do.

Conclusion and Concrete Steps

Obviously, most of the public at large will not find this analysis terribly persuasive. I have not provided a political platform or talking points for elected officials. But there is one group who might be interested—and that is the environmentalists among us—even those we consider, for lack of a better term, more left-leaning. As Christopher Thompson has argued elsewhere: “[O]ne can understand the increasing emergence of environmental awareness as the unthematic revolt of conscience among those descendants of the Enlightenment who intuit that something is deeply flawed in our approaches to the natural order.”⁴⁸ The environmentalists are searching for categories in which to make their arguments. They do not know it, but the categories they need, form and finality, are just waiting to be rediscovered.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 24.

⁴⁸ Christopher Thompson, “Perennial Wisdom: Notes Toward a Green Thomism,” presented at the conference on “Renewing the Face of the Earth: The Church and the Order of Creation,” St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, October 30–31, 2009, and published in the present volume, pages 67–80.

Many environmentalists would not be not satisfied with Niebuhr's brand of realism. After all, what compromise can there be if we accept for the moment the possibility that the ice-caps really are melting and that it is our insatiable demand for consumer goods or reliance on fossil fuels that is causing it? What compromise can there be if entire species of animals and plants are being wiped out by the impact of human activity on their ecosystems? The environmentalists have discovered the reality of a natural teleology and its implications for the human responsibility toward sustaining life on the planet. Political pragmatism is not going to satisfy them.

In a profound reflection on John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* in 1999, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger points out that there is a movement of self-transcendence that is either active or latent in every culture, in every human person. He is addressing the question of how Christianity can speak to people in the context of pluralism and multiculturalism now, in an age of political correctness, when the notion of the particularity of one's own culture or tradition has become a kind of untouchable, unquestioned, almost legal right. What he describes is a historical pattern found in the Old Testament and the New Testament whereby both the preservation of Israel and the spread of Christianity required an act of self-transcendence on the part of the community, a movement away from the particularity of an historical ethnic structure.

His comments lead me to point out that a similar opportunity and a similar demand exist in our current situation. The time may be right to meet the culture whenever we can at the point at which it is already in the process of self-transcendence, at the point at which it is already in movement away from an evil and toward a good. Perhaps we need to imitate St. Paul, whose acknowledgment of the Athenian's search for an unknown God in his speech at the Areopagus led to such dramatic results among the Gentiles. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that this concern for the earth is really a dormant or latent wish to understand the place of human persons in the created order.⁴⁹

The task in the twenty-first century for those who would seek the truth and proclaim it is to find a way to enter into the culture at the point at which it has begun to open itself to universal truth and move out of the prison of mere particularity. The environmental movement is such a movement. It represents an important opportunity for evangelization. If we can invite those who are concerned about creation to consider what the Catholic intellectual tradition has to say about it, they may be led to a deeper reflection on the meaning of their own creatureliness as well.

⁴⁹ See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Culture and Truth: Some Reflections on the Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*," *Patrician Magazine* (Winter, 1999), 8–11.

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of its imminence, our ecological crisis will not be resolved by final scientific proof or carefully crafted policy statements or U.N. action. For in its foundations, it is a question of the origins and ultimate meaning of creation itself, which is prior to and beyond the domain of both science and politics, whether or not their practitioners acknowledge it.⁵⁰ Such questions, if you will, are “above their pay-grade.” It is the responsibility of Christian theologians and philosophers to respond to this problem, to help all of us to understand anew something that Aquinas demonstrated centuries ago: that the natural order possesses an intelligibility and intrinsic goodness that issues from the fact that it is created by God. In my view, the current angst about the environment and man’s place within it reflects the culture’s ill-articulated need to understand, once again, the meaning of our own natural desire to live.⁵¹ N-V

⁵⁰ Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, *Faith, Reason and the Natural Sciences: The Challenge of the Natural Sciences in the Work of Theologians* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2009), 25.

⁵¹ See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Culture and Truth.” See also Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 75, a. 6.