

Finding Our Father and Loving Our Mother: How Humility Can Contribute to an
Understanding of Ecological Theology

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Locke's Second Treatise on Civil Government profoundly shaped the thinking of the American independence movement, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that he was the grandfather of the American Revolution. But when it comes to environmental thinking, his philosophy is less helpful and, in its current incarnations, downright dangerous. I want here to briefly survey how Locke's views on property and nature affect American thought, including Fundamentalist theology. Next, I want to go back to the Augustinian tradition, and look at how the Augustinian understanding of pride and humility can give us a new starting point for discussing our relationship with nature. In particular, I will be discussing the book Finding Our Father, written by one of my favorite professors in seminary, Diogenes Allen.

Having argued in the first treatise against the divine right of kings, in the second Locke argues that political power is in fact the expression of the will of the majority of the people. A nation, he says, is a group of people who have agreed to live and work together to solve their disagreements peacefully and to protect each others' lives, liberty and property. They achieve this by creating a government to make decisions on their behalf, with representatives subject to replacement by

popular vote. Instead of considering individuals first as subjects ruled by others, Locke said each was essentially the ruler of himself or herself. No rational being owned another; rather, each owns his or her own body. Nature is not consciously rational, so natural resources such as water, fruit trees in the forest and so on are unowned, or common property. But whenever a human intentionally shapes or changes nature, say by gathering apples in a basket or plowing a field, through this work that human adds a little of his or her own body to it, and it becomes private property.

While Locke does have some constraints on this natural acquisition, essentially, he treats the natural world as having worth only as it affects humans. People turn nature into property, and have an inalienable right to do so. Locke's philosophy both explicitly and covertly influenced our culture and still does. It shaped the Declaration of Independence and the writing of our Constitution. Less explicitly, his views of property were very congenial to frontier farmers and plantation owners, justifying their wholesale conversion of wilderness to private farmland. Locke basically assumed that Nature was inexhaustible, an idea that was questionable on the British island but which seemed obviously true to the Englishmen and later Americans looking west towards apparently limitless horizons. And even today, this view of Nature is powerful, particularly in the business community: nature is raw material, and essentially limitless, unless pesky regulations get in the way.¹

Locke often used religious language in his political writing, referring to the law of Nature, Reason and the will of God more or less interchangeably. This made it easy for later American religious conservatives to take over his philosophy and incorporate it more or less unaltered. This represents a major and important misunderstanding of Locke's thought, one that in turn delegitimizes the entire theological project of "Christian libertarianism." In his primary theological work, The Reasonableness of Christianity, Locke argues that the true heart of Christianity

¹ William Shaw, Business Ethics, ninth edition (Boston MA: Cengage Learning, 2015) pp. 250-51

is a moral monotheism. He has no real use for miracle stories, or the idea that one guy could die for the sins of others; his religion and thus his God is philosophical, ethical, and like the title says, reasonable. For Locke, saying that the right to property is divine law is the same as saying it is reason's law; thus, we can use reason to interpret it. For some conservative Christians, the "law of God" is more like the absolute eternal pronouncement of the Divine Lawgiver, so far beyond all human reason that even to hint that we might be harming the Earth is literally said to be rebellion against the LORD. Not only is Nature treated as an unlimited resource with value only as human property, but to say otherwise is, in some theological circles, literally a sin. As one example, I would point to Kathleen Hartnett White, nominated by Trump to head the Council on Environmental Quality, who claimed that the belief in global warming was "a kind of paganism."² One scholar sums up this theology: "Contempt for earth has become a mark of faith."³

While this theology has political influence and gets a lot of press, there are other Christian voices. The Augustinian theological tradition is one of the oldest and most fruitful of Western Christianity. As Alasdair MacIntyre discusses in his book, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, the Augustinian tradition presents Adam as the primordial expression of humanity, and Christ as the perfect expression of what it ought to have been. The perfect human life is the life of love, first of God who is the highest good as well as source of all other goods, and then of one's neighbor and of all creation, since God looked at everything God had made and it was all good. The mortal sin in this tradition is pride, and the cardinal virtue is humility.⁴ It was pride

² Veronica Stacqualursi, "White House to Withdraw Environmental Pick's Nomination." CNN February 3, 2018 (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/03/politics/nominee-withdraw-council-environmental-quality/index.html>)

³ Jenkins, Dr. Willis. "Contempt for Creation." Religion and its Publics April 13, 2017 (<https://religionpublics.wixsite.com/forthetimebeing/single-post/2017/04/13/Contempt-For-Creation>)

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame, IN; University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) pp. 146-63

that led Adam to rebel against God.⁵ In seeking to become “like God, knowing good and evil” for himself, Adam turned away from God the only source of Truth and sought to become the source of his own truth. Instead of seeing himself as part of the created order, Adam tried to take God’s place at the center. In doing this Adam, and with him all humanity, not only disobeyed and rebelled against cosmic justice, but also lost knowledge of God, and of our place in reality as creatures of God.

Even the premodern expressions of the Augustinian moral tradition lay a foundation for religious and moral discussions of the environment. Humility tells us that we are not the center of the universe, either individually or collectively; God is the center, and it is God who decides what is valuable by choosing to bring it into existence. It is pride that leads us to think that people or other beings have value only insofar as we choose to value them. This pride is not only a moral vice leading to other injustices and sins, but also an epistemological vice that distorts our view of reality, and of ourselves. Without humility, we cannot properly see the world around us or understand ourselves as one part of creation; instead we proudly see everything else as existing solely for our consumption.

The writings of Diogenes Allen are particularly clear in discussing the concepts of humility, pride and love that are so central to Augustinian thought. In the book Finding Our Father, Allen sets out to distinguish the religious perspective versus the more immediate, default standpoint, or the “moral self” versus the “*de facto* self.”⁶ The *de facto* self is the place we all start. From infancy, we are aware of our needs and strive to meet them, at first instinctively and later with more deliberation. The world as we perceive it centers on ourselves, quite literally as far as perception goes, as well as psychologically; the world is made up of objects of desire, of obstacles and tools. Later we may rationally conclude that there are other persons beside ourselves, but we still tend to think of them as they relate to our own needs: friends or foes, lovers and beloved, strangers or acquaintances, foreigners

⁵ St. Augustine, City of God, Book XIV, chapter XIII

⁶ Diogenes Allen, Finding Our Father (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1974) pp. 21-48

versus neighbors. We may rationally know that this is not an accurate picture of the universe, that in fact we are but momentary atoms in a very large cosmos, but that is not what we experience most of the time. Normally, and naturally, we experience ourselves and our own needs most strongly.

But while it is rare to perceive reality accurately, Allen does believe it is possible. He describes it first as it is depicted in Iris Murdoch's novel The Unicorn, where an extremely self-centered young man, facing inevitable death, finally lets go of his egoism and senses the beauty of all things. This, Allen says, is "perfect love" of the world. The young man realizes that through his whole life, people and things have been around him that were wonderful in themselves, regardless of how or whether they affected him at all. Allen writes: "... This nearness of death enabled him to become full of the presence of other things and to lack self-consciousness because by its nearness he became aware that he had no power or control over them....It is the withdrawal of power or control, then, which is fundamental to a recognition of the independence of things, and with their independence, they can confront him with a compelling, beautiful radiance."⁷ Allen then goes on to discuss whether such an experience is possible in reality, outside of the confines and improbable conditions of a novel. He cites the writings of Simone Weil, the French philosopher writing in Vichy France, and Laurens van der Post, a World War II POW expecting summary execution as the war was ending, as two real-life examples of this same experience. In both cases, people who had given up or lost control of the world found themselves moved spontaneously to experience and to love that which was entirely independent of themselves, to love what is simply because it is, and to forgive even what was crushing them.

So this experience of what Allen calls "perfect love" exists, but in practice the *de facto* person lacks ontological humility. Each of us can see the world as orbiting around us, and we do so quite naturally. But this is a distortion of reality. If I am to experience the truth, I need to move beyond my standpoint as a *de facto* person and

⁷ Allen, pp. 23-24

to strive to become a “moral person... one who is aware that he is but one reality among many realities.”⁸ This is a position that none of us is able to occupy more than fleetingly. Such an experience would only be sustainable for someone who, knowing he or she is perfectly loved by God, has ceased to think about his or her own existence because the experience of God’s love has become central.⁹ It is self-centeredness, or pride, which distorts the person’s experience of God and existence; and it is ontological humility that makes perfect love and a true experience of reality possible.¹⁰

The epistemological and ontological claim that perfect love is the truth has ethical implications. The first is the need for attentiveness.¹¹ We should strive to consider each thing in its own particularity, for whatever exists is special and has value just by virtue of existing. In particular, we should consider that living things are not only of value, but also vulnerable; and being vulnerable, they call out for care. Everything that exists is its own center of activity, doing its own thing, and thus has potential to cause and to suffer harm; living things are particularly susceptible to harm since they can so easily be turned into nonliving things. Most suffer some sort of fear and pain, but even the least can lose its most essential quality: life. Since our fellow humans are so vulnerable and so unique, we can start by paying attention to the needs of our neighbors. But even beyond attending to

⁸ Allen, p. 31

⁹ In a somewhat complicated way, this becomes an argument for the belief in the coming Kingdom of God. In Kant, the moral demand together with the impossibility of perfectly realizing the moral task in this life made it reasonable to believe in an afterlife, where one could forever strive to more fully fulfill the requirements of morality. For Allen, the awareness of perfect love, plus the knowledge of the truth of the moral perspective, together with the impossibility of sustaining moral personhood in this life suggests that there must be another sort of existence after this one, in which the *de facto* person indeed dies but the moral person lives on, perfectly loved by God and perfectly loving all things and God, so that the awareness of reality actually matches the nature of reality.

¹⁰ Allen says that even the scientific study of nature, when done to understand what is simply because it is rather than for some ulterior goal, can be a religious act even if the researcher is unaware of this. Really attending to particulars, without any attempt to draw them into your orbit but simply to appreciate them for themselves, is to practice the perfect love God has for creation, in our own limited way. And in attending to the world and to particulars, we learn to appreciate not only their beauty, but also their vulnerability and need for our care.

¹¹ Allen, pp. 69-73

people, and to living things in general, we can attend to whatever is, and learn to see the beauty in all things and in nature as a whole. Beauty, as Plato said, has the power to turn our attention (however briefly) away from our selves, and towards the goodness around us; and it is when we cease to be so self-occupied and full of ourselves that God can find a way into our lives. Allen writes:

If we then seize the opportunity created by the recognition of beauty, we can steadily train ourselves to move away from a *de facto* stance in relation to all things, even when we are not at that moment aware of their beauty. In this time of ecological crisis, such attentiveness is exceedingly relevant; for we have been so mesmerized by the glory and grandeur of wealth that we have been unable to regard the earth as a reality which has, merely as a reality, some independence of our wants and desires and hence is worthy of respect. Our self-centered, solipsistic relation to nature now promises to reap what it has sown.¹²

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There is a stark contrast with today's Evangelical mainstream and Allen's Christianity of perfect love. The Evangelical theology, which is now at least unofficial U.S. government policy, is that the world is not made up of ineffably valuable particulars. It is made up of individual human beings with inalienable rights, particularly the right to property; no living or nonliving thing has any rights

¹² Allen, pp. 72-3

or value at all except as property of some person. Those humans who have God's favor, by dint of proper fundamentalist Christian theology and proper conservative politics, are loved by God; other particulars exist only to serve their needs. Effectively, this fundamentalist position rejects the experience of perfect love because it sees God as loving the *de facto* person and catering to that person's desires for comfort and control. These desires are fulfilled largely in this world, as tithes are rewarded with material prosperity and conservative politics is rewarded with national sovereignty over other countries.¹³

In discussing the ethical implications of the experience of perfect love, Allen argues that we are not to ask God to do for us what we are able to do for ourselves.¹⁴ If we have the ability to do something, we should thank God for that and use that ability. If we have the ability to understand the world, or to preserve it from destruction or to make it more viable by cleaning up the damage we have done in our selfishness, we ought to do it. Again, this is at odds with the current theological vogue, which argues that anyone who supports defending the ecology is actually at odds with God.¹⁵ Preachers, pundits and politicians ridicule the idea that humans have the ability to substantially harm or substantially benefit the world God has made; therefore, the only thing any of us is called to do is to try to please God by obeying the teachings of conservative leaders, and wait for God to fix everything else. The Augustinian moral tradition would respond that love is expressed in humble service. To care for the Earth is to love it because God has created it, and to love it because one loves God and glorifies God by loving what God has created.

I've tried to lay out two significant moral traditions that express themselves in two very different Protestant theologies. One begins with the earliest days of

¹³ For more on this, see James Comey, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jerry Falwell: The Christian in Politics (student thesis, College of William and Mary, 1982) <https://publish.wm.edu/honorstheses/1116/>

¹⁴ Allen, pp. 111-116

¹⁵ O'Conner, Brendan. "How Fossil Fuel Money Made Climate Change Denial the Word of God." *Splinter* 8/8/2017 (<https://splinternews.com/how-fossil-fuel-money-made-climate-denial-the-word-of-g-1797466298>)

Western Christianity, and continues through religious and even nonreligious thinkers. It is a tradition that sees the greatest moral danger as pride, the cardinal virtue as humility, and the fulfillment of human existence as loving God with all one's heart and mind and strength and one's neighbor as oneself. The other crystallized in the English Enlightenment, and influenced European and American thinking, most prominently in the American Revolution, which was justified by appealing to its principles. This tradition sees conflict and oppression as the greatest evils, reason as the greatest virtue, and individual liberty and happiness (understood as a calm, sustained pleasure) as the best human life. While there are resources within the Lockean moral tradition to start a conversation on environmentalism, in the theological current flowing from Locke through Jerry Falwell into today's federal government, we don't see this.

But even at its best, a social contract philosophy like Locke's can only treat Nature as a resource for the enjoyment of humans, since only humans enter into the contract. The Augustinian moral tradition, by contrast, begins with an essentially spiritual foundation: the Platonic belief in the reality of transcendent Good, which makes itself known to those who are willing to receive it, coupled with the Abrahamic belief in one good, loving, personal God who created the world out of love, because it was good for these things to exist. From this perspective, the extreme individualism that Enlightenment social contract theory takes as its starting point is simply the first sign of pride, not an essential reality. The reality, or as Allen puts it, the moral perspective, is that humans are one part of the created order. They do not create order out of chaos by imposing or founding a social contract; they discover their parts as particulars among billions of other particular things, each of which is good in its own way and each of which is perfectly loved by God.

The stereotypical Christian position on ecology is not the only one, or the oldest, or even the majority opinion. It is a rather recent innovation, which has become prominent in recent years because of a well-orchestrated campaign heavily

funded by business interests and driven by social-political concerns, that is, “The Culture Wars.” It is a position that owes more to John Locke than to the Biblical heritage, interpreting Scripture through the lens of Locke’s views on property and a libertarian version of Christian Dominionism. Because it is well-funded, it has a loud voice, and is currently very politically influential. However, it is not the only Christian voice. The other voice I have sought to call attention to is much older, and more widely influential. It begins with St. Augustine of Hippo, and thus is foundational for much of Western Christianity both Catholic and Protestant. This tradition is often drowned out today in the press, but it is not silenced. This theology offers Christians the best resources to contribute helpfully to facing the ecological crisis brought on by human abuse of our environment, abuse at times abetted by Christianity itself and by the same heritage of John Locke which gave us our Revolution.