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Diverse Approaches to Nature and a Sustainable Future

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What is the common ground on which different approaches to 'nature' (scientific, religious, humanist, etc.) can meet to create a more sustainable future? What does it mean to lead a good life in a world of limited resources?

We western inquirers, endemically 'modernist' in our thinking and projecting, are in the process of discovering a 'post-modern' approach to realities around us. which looks quite familiar to traditional societies. For the optimism of modernist scenarios, built on 'progress', offers a highly equivocal goal at best, and one which, unilaterally pursued, carried us ineluctably into a stark 'ecological crisis'. Yet to keep that optimism from toppling over into despair, we need a transcendent source of *hope*, which begins only when we have come to reject its 'bastard step-child', optimism. For that optimism which fueled progress left no room for 'sustainability' or 'limited resources', spurred on by unlimited horizons of human ingenuity quite oblivious of limits. A useful guide here will be Charles Taylor, whose magnum opus, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), leaves ample room for different approaches to 'nature' (scientific, religious, humanist, etc.).

I shall also glean from Emmanuel Katongole's latest endeavor to understand what this modernist approach did to Africa (*The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* [Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2010]), as well as offer antidotes which speak directly to our aspirations in a post-modern west:. His critique of colonialist education and the quality of leaders it produced, and why it did so, offers one more poignant example of how we westerners might finally learn from our adventures into improving traditional societies, to help us identify and perhaps to correct the mindset which produced those depredations in the first place. Indeed, what makes this approach fruitful is our salutary realization that the inescapable underside of 'progress' was the colonialism which funded it. It is evident in the myopic approach of the best NGO's active

in sub-Saharan Africa which unwittingly reproduce colonial strategies, as well as in the predatory approaches to governance on the part of African political elites. How can we turn that around?

Before attempting to answer that question, we must realize that the terms suggesting such a project are ours: do we really want to turn around what we have done? And if we do, have we the slightest idea how to do that? Here we cannot simply wring our hands, but must go to the root of our mindset, one which spawned colonialism and will surely drive us over the cliff. At the root of it is our facile use of the typology: 'pre-modern' and 'modern', where we presume that 'modern' means 'critical', and so must supersede any 'premodern' considerations. Hegel's philosophical outlook determines that mindset, yet it is uncanny how readily we have all appropriated it, whether familiar or not with Hegel. How then can we describe the features of a 'modern mindset'? Let me offer a genealogy for doing so.

Regularly teaching a course in ancient and medieval philosophy has led me to identify the difference between these two periods quite clearly: the presence of a free creator. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers converged in their efforts to find place for a free creator in the apparently seamless Hellenic philosophy they inherited. (Josef Pieper's observation that 'creation is the hidden element in the philosophy of St. Thomas' should have alerted us decades ago to this operative difference from Aristotle ([The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays](#) [New York: Pantheon, 1957 47-67])). Yet if we can say, schematically, that the presence of a free creator divides medieval from ancient philosophy, what marks the subsequent transition to modern philosophy? Many things, of course, but to continue speaking schematically, modern philosophy wanted to distinguish itself by eliminating theological overtones from the 'scholastics', so proceeded by avoiding reference to a creator. Yet the creator is a bit large to overlook, so the gradual tendency was to deny its relevance, as evidenced in Enlightenment fascination with 'the Greeks', even when they seemed more a construct than an historical reference. Aristotle, after all, had managed quite well without a creator. Now if that be the case—again, speaking quite schematically—we can characterize modern philosophy as 'post-medieval', where the 'post-' prefix carries a note of denial—in this case, of a creator, either directly or implicitly. A cursory look at the strategies whereby modern philosophers compensated for the absence of a creator, however, shows them to lead inescapably to foundational grounds, be they 'self-evident' propositions or 'sense-data' or whatever. Once these proved illusory, we cannot but enter a 'post-modern' world. And if our presumptions regarding 'philosophy' itself (à la Rorty) are inherently linked to such modern strategies, we will inevitably regard a 'postmodern context' as one in which 'anything goes'.

Yet here is where our schema can help: if 'modern philosophy' can be seen as 'post-medieval', then 'post-modern' philosophy will have to be read as 'post (post-medieval)'. And while the 'post-' prefixes

may not connote the same sort of denials, we will be directed to a sense of 'post-modern' which bears affinities with medieval inquiry. Put more positively and less schematically, both medieval and post-modern inquiry are more at ease with Gadamer's contention that any inquiry whatsoever rests on fiduciary premises. In practice, this means that faith may be regarded as contributing to knowing, however startling such a contention would prove to Descartes, though like any other mode of knowing, faith will ever be in need of critical assessment. (Ironically enough, those forms of inquiry we have come to call 'Thomist' owed more to Descartes and the context of modernity than to Aquinas himself, for they sought a metaphysical way of attaining the very certitude which Descartes had postulated epistemologically. By way of revenge, Cartesian failure would spell Thomistic failure as well.) Yet an experience of mediaeval thought leaves us wondering, as well, whether there can be a viable epistemology without metaphysics, so a constructive postmodern ethos can be shown to direct us (albeit negatively) to see that there is no way to move to the level of metaphysics without a critical faith.

All this asks one to accept a great deal of large-scale analysis, of course, so let us play it out with salient examples. First of all, what can we mean by a 'free creator'? Not certainly, a being alongside other beings, albeit larger, for such a one could never serve as creator of the rest. So it must be a One which is the source of existence of everything; in short, a 'cause of being'. Now that very move is a challenge to modern philosophers, for whom 'being a cause' is inextricably linked with things we know in an arena we inhabit. Yet creation, of course, cannot be that sort of activity, so something will have to move us beyond an endemically 'empiricist' mindset. (So if Hegel provided the 'premodern'/modern' scheme, Kant and the British empiricists epitomize our learned inability to conceive of the presence of a creator to the universe.) Yet that built-in limitation to our cognitive capacities is celebrated as well by the very traditions which assert a free creator, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. None of them claims we can properly conceptualize a divinity or its characteristic activity of creating *ex nihilo*, that is, presupposing nothing at all.

Yet as preposterous as that assertion may sound, the fact is that anyone willing to entertain it has at least the possibility of seeing themselves as creatures and their life as a call; otherwise we are left only with a career! And one notable philosopher to whom I voiced this salient distinction was unable to see any difference, so conceptual habits run very deep. Yet that ought not surprise us, since this difference only came clear to an inquirer as resolute as Augustine in the tenth book of his intellectual and spiritual journey. Yet the journey has been made even more difficult for us, for once 'modernity' removed a creator from the scenario, we will find ourselves re-introducing such a One as the 'biggest thing' around. (But that simply reminds us, to use Foucault's terms, that our *episteme* cannot allow a 'cause of being'.) A devastating result of this lacuna which may never have struck us is that it limits the universe to material creation, with human

beings at its summit. And why not?, we spontaneously ask. So-called 'deep ecologists', sensing something wrong here, identify this picture as one further result of human hubris, often linking that with religious habits, and especially with the divine command in Genesis 1:28 to 'master the earth'.

But what if that reading of Genesis were itself a modern innovation, reflecting a mindset oblivious of spiritual creation, epitomized (in each of these religious traditions) as 'angels'? For a medieval view, human beings combine in themselves both material and spiritual creation, placed (as the psalmist has it) 'a little lower than the angels', yet indeed lower. So without attempting to trace the internal connection, an intentional creator seems to be creating intentional creatures with it, of which angels are the purest example, so that human beings, while created 'in the divine image', will occupy a second tier. That is, we are not 'on top', so cannot presume to be licensed to order everything else created to serve to our needs, altering anything we encounter so that it may (recalling Hegel) contribute to our development or 'progress'. Is not that presumption at the root of what has emerged as the 'ecological crisis', as it also governed colonialism? So the roots of *modernity*, which desperately tried to sideline theology, turn out to be theological (The Theological Origins of Modernity, by Michael Allen Gillespie [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008]). And if the inevitable result of such a modernist mindset will be the ecological crisis, then 'turning things around' will involve a therapy not unlike Wittgenstein's in the *Investigations*, which we can call 'theological'.

Yet one advantage of our cultural location, underscored in the recent document endorsed by more than 200 Muslim thinkers, 'A Common Word' (<http://www.acommonword.com/>), is that 'theological' will embrace at least Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, while being open to yet farther interfaith reaches. So a depth analysis of the 'ecological crisis' can and must be undertaken employing interfaith perspectives and tools. In the process, we will discover that seeing 'religion' as the culprit, as in much criticism of Christian use of the Hebrew scriptures, is doubtless true, yet the religious perspectives at work prove to be distinctively 'modernist', so embodying a distinctly secular view of the origin and destiny of the universe, as Charles Taylor so aptly described religious thought of this era. We have explored the potency of the classical alternative in a volume soon to be published by Cambridge University Press: *Act of Creation with its Theological Consequences*, edited by David Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, and Janet Soskice (2010). A taste of that volume as it presents a Christian view already seasoned by exchange with Jewish and Muslim interlocutors—Maimonides and Avicenna—follows. It shows the quality of philosophical reflection needed to undertake this 'theological therapy'—'ST' for Aquinas refers to his *Summa Theologiae*.

Aquinas' capacity to integrate philosophical with theological demands is displayed in the initial article in the *Summa Theologiae* on creation: 'Must everything that is have been caused by God'

(*ST*, I, 44,1)? Relying on his identification of God as that One whose very essence is to exist, Aquinas shows why one must 'necessarily say that whatever in any way *is* is from God'. For if 'God is sheer existence subsisting of its very nature (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*), [and so] must be unique, . . . then it follows that all things other than God are not their own existence but share in existence' (*ST*, I, 3, 4). So the Neoplatonic distinction between *essential* and *participated* being is invoked to give everything but the creator the stamp of *created*. Very little, if anything, is said here about causation, but the elements are in place to press for a unique form of it, even though another way of posing the initial question employs Aristotle explicitly: 'whether God is the efficient cause of all beings?' An objection asks about those 'natural necessities' which Aristotle presumed simply to be, or always to have been: 'since there are many such in reality [—spiritual substances and heavenly bodies which carry no principle of dissolution within themselves—], all beings are not from God.' Aquinas deftly diverts this objection by recalling the primacy of existing: 'an active cause is required not simply because the effect could not be [i.e., is contingent], but because the effect would not be if the cause were not [existing]' (*ST*, I, 44, 1, ad. 2). So even 'necessary things' will require a cause for their very being: this is a radical revision of Aristotle, depending on the Avicennian distinction of *essence* from *existing*.

What it suggests is that Aquinas was seeking for a way of understanding created being using Aristotelian metaphysics, yet the 'givens' of that philosophy will have to be transformed to meet the exigency of a free creator. Put another way, which anticipates our elucidation, the *being* which Aristotle took to characterize substance must become (for Aquinas) an *esse ad creatorem* (an existing in relation to the creator). This is another way of saying that 'all things other than God are not their own existence', either in the radical sense on which this article insists, distinguishing creatures from the creator, or even in a more attenuated sense in which the being which they *have* cannot be 'their own' in the sense of belonging to them 'by right' or by virtue of their being the kind of things they are (which was Aristotle's view). Everything other than God receives its being from the creator as a gift. Yet such derived or participated things are no less real than Aristotle's substances, since now there is no other way to be except to participate in the *ipsum esse* of the creator. So the nature of the creating act depends crucially on our conception of the One from whom all that is comes.

Now if that One is most properly identified as 'He who is' since 'the existence of God is his essence and since this is true of nothing else', then we are in the presence of One whose characteristic act will be 'to produce existence [*esse*] absolutely. . . which belongs to the meaning of creation' defined

as 'the emanation of the whole of being from a universal cause' or 'universal being' (*ST*, I, 45, 5). That being's 'proper effect', then, is the very existence of things. One implication of this unique form of causation is that

creation is not a change, except merely according to our way of understanding, [since] creation, whereby the entire substance of things is produced, does not allow of some common subject now different from what it was before, except according to our way of understanding which conceives an object as first not existing at all and afterwards as existing. (*ST*, I, 45, 2, ad. 2).

So creating is not a process answering the question: *how* does God create? God creates intentionally, that is, by intellect and will, though these are identical in God, so Aquinas has no difficulty adopting the metaphor of 'emanation' to convey something of the act of creation: God's consenting to the universe coming forth from God—that One whose essence is simply to-be (*ST*, I, 19, 4, ad. 4). The revelation of God's inner life as Father, Son, and Spirit will in fact allow Aquinas to say more, while respecting the absence of process. For it is this revelation which directs us to

the right idea of creation. The fact of saying that God made all things by His Word excludes the error of those who say that God produced things by necessity. When we say that in Him there is a procession of love, we show that God produced creatures not because He needed them, nor because of any other extrinsic reason, but on account of the love of His own goodness. (*ST*, I, 32, 1, ad. 3).

So the act of creating is not a 'mere overflow' (or emanation) from this One whose very nature is to-be. It is rather an intentional emanating and so a gracious gift. Yet the mode of action remains utterly consonant with the divine nature, hence the natural metaphor of *emanation*.

The other metaphor which Aquinas invokes is that of the artisan: 'God's knowledge is the cause of things; for God's knowledge stands to all created things as the artist's to his products,' with the implication that 'natural things are suspended between God's [practical] knowledge and our [speculative] knowledge' (*ST*, I, 14, 8, and ad 3). The deft way Aquinas employs Aristotle's distinction between *practical* and *speculative* knowing here allows him to utilize the metaphor of artisan critically, and so avoid pitting divine and human knowing against one another. Since God's knowing brings things into being and sustains them, we need not worry ourselves whether God's knowing 'what will have happened' determines future contingent events, since the knowing which God has of what will have taken place is not propositional in character. God knows what God does;

the model is practical knowing. Taking a cue from Aquinas' strategy regarding God's knowledge of singulars, we must say that divine knowledge extends as far as divine activity, for God does not work mindlessly. Yet we can have no more determinate model for divine knowing than that (*ST*, I, 14, 11). Yet the artisan metaphor for creation might lead one to suspect that the product could subsist without any further action on the part of its maker. So emanation will need to be invoked to remind us of the revolution which the presence of a creator and the act of creation has worked in Aristotle: the very being (*esse*) of creatures is now an *esse-ad*, 'a relation to the creator as the origin of its existence'. (*ST*, I, 45, 3). Aristotle's definition of substance as 'what subsists in itself' can still function to distinguish substance from accident, but the being inherent to created substances proceeds from another, from the source who alone subsists eternally as the One whose essence is to be. And if substances must now be denominated 'created substances', the causality associated with creating can hardly be comprehended among Aristotle's four causes.

For the two contenders, efficient and formal, each fail since an efficient cause without something to work on would be unintelligible to Aristotle, while trying to fit the creator into Aristotle's formal cause would directly foster pantheism, as Aquinas notes in *ST*, I, 3, 8. So a 'cause of being' must be *sui generis*, as we shall see, confirming 'the distinction' of creator from creation, while the founding 'non-reciprocal relation of dependence' will be unique as well, and best characterized by the borrowed expression 'non-duality' (See Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dualist Christian*, ed. Bradley Malkovsky [Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002]). So the practical knowing involved in creating will be more like *doing* than *making*, suggesting Jams Ross's prescient image of the 'being of the cosmos like a song on the breath of a singer,' while emphasizing that 'God's causing being can be analogous to many diverse things without even possibly being the same as any one of them' (James Ross, 'Creation II,' in Alfred Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983),).

If that is rough going both philosophically and theologically, perhaps we can understand why religious thinkers have regularly avoided trying to articulate it. But it should be clear now that we have no other choice than to make the attempt, if we are to stand in awe of a universe which emerges to us as a gift. And there seems to be no more effective way to counter our rapacious modern appetite for exploitation exercised so extensively and so mindlessly. Or can one think of another?