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The Common Good

Human, or Cosmic?

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Introduction

Papal reflection on ecological ethics came into prominence in the papacy of John Paul II and has become a touchstone of Benedict XVI’s papacy. Similarly, Catholic reflection on the problems of ecological degradation has grown so extensively that “care for God’s creation” is now one of the principal themes of Catholic social teaching and Catholic social thought (see U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2005). Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have drawn on a wealth of theological principles and from established Catholic social teaching to develop an already robust ecological ethic. In this essay I focus on one key principle of Catholic social teaching pertinent to ecological issues: the common good. The common good is a major lens through which to view environmental concerns given its longstanding place in Catholic tradition and its obvious applications to environmental problems, in which pollution or degradation in one part will affect the good of the whole. In their teaching on ecology, John Paul II and Benedict XVI each appeal to the idea of the

common good. However, comparing them to each other, and in turn to the wider Catholic tradition, reveals some tension and ambiguity. Should the common good refer to the proper functioning of the planet for human well-being, or should the common good be understood in a broader sense, so that nonhuman creatures participate in it as well beyond their service to human needs? Put simply, is the common good purely for humans, or could it be planetary and cosmic as well?

I propose that papal teaching should adopt the notion of a “cosmic common good,” one that includes human flourishing but transcends it as well. I begin by reviewing how John Paul II and Benedict XVI understand the common good and how they relate it to ecological ethics. While John Paul II seems to allow the possibility of a common good that includes more than human well-being, Benedict XVI seems more committed to limiting the common good to humans. I will then offer three reasons why Benedict XVI should indeed embrace such a cosmic common good: first, it is more in line with the trajectory of contemporary Catholic teaching; second, it offers a more honest and accurate assessment of human dignity and the threats to it in modern society; and third, it is a more theocentric approach that is rooted in the theology of creation and is more consistent with Benedict’s own theology of creation.

John Paul II and Benedict XVI on the Common Good

John Paul II and Benedict XVI have each used the notion of the common good, or of the idea of a good held in common, to focus attention on environmental issues. John Paul II, however, leaves more room for a good in nature that must be respected for its own sake and not solely because it impacts human well-being. For example, in his 1990 World Day of Peace message, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*, John Paul II speaks strongly about “respect for life” and for the order of the cosmos: “Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a ‘cosmos’ endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity” (1989: 8). He laments the lack of a “due respect for nature” and encourages the emerging “new *ecological awareness*” (1989: 1).

At the same time, John Paul II also contends, “the earth is ultimately a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all” (1989: 8). Drawing on *Gaudium et Spes*, which teaches that “God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples” (Vatican II: 69), John Paul II laments the vast discrepancy between the rich and the masses of the poor who live in the barest conditions. Here he understands the earth primarily as a good for human use. On the other hand, he also links this injustice to the threat to nature itself: “Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness – both individual and collective – are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence” (1989: 8).

John Paul II points to these two different themes – “The concepts of an ordered universe and a common heritage” – to call for more integrated international action, a new solidarity between states, and more responsibility on the part of both developed and developing nations. Throughout, John Paul argues for a common good that asserts the human responsibility to care for the order of creation in its own right:

Even men and women without any particular religious conviction, but with an acute sense of their responsibilities for the common good, recognize their obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment. All the more should men and women who believe in God the Creator, and who are thus convinced that there is a well-defined unity and order in the world, feel called to address the problem. Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith (1989: 15).

John Paul II focuses most of his attention on how environmental issues affect human beings, yet as we can see, he also leaves some space for a nonhuman common good. He calls upon people to recognize the “well-defined unity and order in the world,” and he cites a “duty towards nature and the Creator” as an “essential part” of Christian faith.¹

Benedict XVI centers his understanding of the common good of the Earth in terms of the impact on human beings, and while he concurs with John Paul’s respect for the order of the cosmos, he takes great care to emphasize the importance of human dignity. For example, in *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict stresses human duties to nature:

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other (2009a: 51).

The “book of nature” focuses less on the ordered cosmos that John Paul II describes and more on what stems from our duties to human beings and their integral human development. Indeed, Benedict here seems to equate the common good of nature with integral human development. Concerning the common good, Benedict writes,

To love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to attain it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us,” made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it (2009a: 7).

Here Benedict clearly limits the common good to a human phenomenon. The common good is made up by human beings who live in society, and it is “sought not for its own sake” but on behalf of human beings. It is unclear how the good of the order of the cosmos fits

¹ This fits with some of John Paul II’s earlier writings, such as *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) in which he outlines three factors of environmentally responsible development: 1) respect for nature; 2) recognition that natural resources are limited and perhaps nonrenewable; and 3) limits on pollution. The first corresponds to the concept of an ordered universe, while the second and third focus more on the earth as a heritage for all people.

into this framework unless and until it affects human beings' ability to pursue their own good.

Benedict repeatedly concerns himself with the centrality of the human person, and his/her development. For example, he emphasizes various dimensions of responsibility elicited from humanity's relationship to the natural environment, such that the environment "is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole" (2009a: 48). The common good can include varying layers of concern for human beings, but there is no sense of a responsibility to nature itself, as John Paul II suggested.² Benedict XVI exhorts society to exercise a responsible stewardship of creation and to make certain life-style changes, but this is done in order to promote integral human development, and to strengthen the bonds of humanity.³

Benedict strives to find a middle position between two extremes that in his perspective threaten integral human development and human dignity. A proper Christian understanding of nature sees in it the work of God's activity, and the Christian knows that humans may use nature responsibly "to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation" (2009a: 48). "If this vision is lost," he continues, "we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it." Thus, on the one hand, Benedict critiques a position of eco-centrism or bio-centrism that he believes discounts the unique value and the supreme position of the human person. "It is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism – human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense" (2009a: 48). Benedict is concerned that some Christians might espouse an understanding of nature as superior to the human person, and he insists that nature not become "an untouchable taboo." On the other hand, Benedict also critiques the technocratic and technological control of nature, arguing Christians must reject the attitude that "aims at total technical dominion over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a 'grammar' which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation" (2009a: 48).

² For Benedict, nature is intimately woven into the fabric of society, and thus, "The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa." In other words, "Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society." (2009a: 51). Again, we see that treatment of nature is important because it affects human social relationships.

³ Similarly, in his 2010 World Day of Peace Message, entitled *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, Benedict focuses on the integral development of the human person. References to the common good are made explicitly with regard to the centrality of the human person in creation: "The ecological crisis offers an historic opportunity to develop a common plan of action aimed at orienting the model of global development towards greater respect for creation and for an integral human development inspired by the values proper to charity in truth. I would advocate the adoption of a model of development based on the centrality of the human person, on the promotion and sharing of the common good, on responsibility, on a realization of our need for a changed life-style" (2009b: 9). Though Benedict acknowledges the need for a "greater respect for creation," such respect revolves around a primary concern for human development as our shared common good.

Benedict discerns two threats to the human person, and he is sure to ward off any hint of pantheism before critiquing a mindset that sees nature only as a resource for our desires.⁴

Benedict XVI has made environmental concerns and the theme of proper human stewardship a prominent component of his papacy, for which those concerned with care of creation are grateful. His understanding of the common good focuses on how human beings are affected by environmental conditions, but this limited focus has still motivated an energetic advocacy for environmental causes. In comparing Benedict XVI to John Paul II, however, I sense a tension in the differences between them, and it highlights an ambiguity in Catholic social teaching thus far: Is the common good strictly what pertains to human well-being? If something negatively impacts nonhuman creatures and yet does not affect the human common good, would Benedict XVI see any moral implications for that? Or would this be a neutral occurrence, something that transpires outside of the realm of moral evaluation?

I argue that Benedict, and Catholic social teaching more broadly, should adopt the notion of a cosmic common good, which incorporates and even strengthens the human common good as it asserts the reality of a common good that transcends human flourishing. Moreover, I suggest three reasons why Benedict XVI should adopt the notion of a cosmic common good: first, it better represents the general currents of Catholic social thought; second, it offers a better defense of human dignity; and third, it better reflects a Catholic and theocentric theology of creation.

Cosmic Common Good in Catholic Social Thought

The first reason Benedict XVI should revise his understanding of the common good is that it seems to run counter to the general trend of recent Catholic social thought. Other documents of Catholic social teaching – namely the documents of episcopal conferences, as well as of John Paul II – depict a broader conception of what is included in the common good and maintain the possibility of a nonhuman common good. Benedict’s position on the common good is consistent with John Paul II’s statements, but John Paul II offers greater concern for the order of creation for itself that Benedict seems to want to elide. Moreover, while Benedict is consistent with the rest of the hierarchical magisterium, he is by no means identical with them. Many assorted episcopal documents move much closer to a cosmic common good. For example, the U.S. Catholic bishops, in their 1991 document *Renewing the Earth*, highlight the importance of the “planetary common good,” and they call for “a new solidarity” that “requires sacrifices of our own self-interest for the good of others *and of the earth we share*” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 1991; emphasis added). Similarly, in

⁴ Benedict makes a parallel argument in his 2008 World Day of Peace Message, *The Human Family, a Community of Peace*: “We need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion. Human beings, obviously, are of supreme worth vis-à-vis creation as a whole. Respecting the environment does not mean considering material or animal nature more important than man. Rather, it means not selfishly considering nature to be at the complete disposal of our own interests, for future generations also have the right to reap its benefits and to exhibit towards nature the same responsible freedom that we claim for ourselves” (2007: 7). Thus he underscores the supremacy of human beings in creation and insists nature cannot be more important than humans. The “good of all” seems clearly limited to the good of humans.

their powerful statement, *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?*, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines discuss humans and nonhumans occupying a “community of the living,” and their extended meditations on the various aspects of the land strongly suggest a common good that is global and cosmic.

Furthermore, Benedict’s limitation of the common good to solely human concerns is at odds with the trajectory of the wider magisterium of Catholic theologians, many of whom advocate directly for an extension and expansion of the common good to deal adequately and realistically with environmental concerns (see Hart; Schaefer; Thompson; Himes and Himes; Butkus and Colmes; and Vogt). John Hart, for example, argues that “‘common good’ understandings should be extended to nonhuman creation” (68), and he expands the “common good” into four different categories to explore the relationship between humanity and the Earth. For Hart, the “common good” represents “the collective well-being of a community, whether solely human in constitution or including the biotic community as a whole” (147). Jame Schaefer draws on multiple classical theologians to delineate her own fivefold common good. Schaefer calls on human beings to value: the evolutionary process, intrinsically and instrumentally; the intrinsic goodness of natural entities; the instrumental goodness of natural entities; the contributions each entity makes to its ecosystem; and ecosystems for their common good (2009: 17-42). Each of these five is a way of envisioning a planetary and cosmic common good (see Schaefer 2010). And J. Milburn Thompson draws on the theme of companionship articulated by Michael and Kenneth Himes to argue that the “companionship model enlarges the common good to include all of creation. It can recognize a special role for humanity, but it gives the natural world a genuinely intrinsic value” (162). For these theologians and many others, the cosmic common good is an authentic articulation of Catholic social teaching and of the common good.

Cosmic Common Good as Prudential Judgment

The second reason why Benedict’s ecological vision of the common good should expand as these other theologians argue is because a cosmic common good is a better defense of the threats both to human dignity and to the order of creation.

Here I presume that Benedict’s ecological ethic is based in part on an estimation of what most threatens human dignity and what is required to safeguard it. Hence his restriction of the common good to human concerns is a form of prudential judgment. Benedict tries to defend human dignity and find a middle ground between pantheism and technological domination, both of which, in his perspective, eclipse the truth about the human person. Yet I think he does not adequately appreciate the imbalance between these two poles. In virtue theory, one is supposed to lean against the extreme to which she is more susceptible (see Aristotle: 48). Yet the temptation to pantheism on the one hand, and the temptation to see nature as “raw material to be manipulated [for] our pleasure” on the other, do not represent equal dangers. The forces agitating for economic development and even superdevelopment (see John Paul II 1987: 28.1-2), for progress, and for the technological control of nature are much more powerful and pervasive than the voices calling for an ecocentric or biocentric ethic. The latter may potentially have negative ramifications for human dignity – though that in itself needs more clarification – but by and large the former poses a much greater threat, not only to human well-being but to the Earth as a whole. I

contend that the greatest danger today to human dignity is not the notion that human beings should see themselves as part of a greater whole of creation, but the notion that human happiness consists of economic super-development and consumption. “Integral human development” is not a sufficient counterweight to these forces.⁵ Benedict XVI ought to adopt a more inclusive and holistic sense of the common good in order to place humanity within a context that is broader than itself, where humans are not the sole measure of progress or of the good. To limit the common good to human flourishing only seems to reinforce the kind of narcissism and individualism that elsewhere Benedict is committed to dismantling.⁶

Cosmic Common Good as Faithful Reflection of the Doctrine of Creation

There is a third and deeper reason, however, why Benedict XVI should endorse an understanding of the common good that is cosmic: it is rooted in an authentically Catholic and theocentric theology of creation, as he himself demonstrates. When discussing ecological ethics, Benedict seems wary of an environmentalism inspired by “deep ecology.” In *Caritas in Veritate* and other documents, Benedict asserts that it is contrary to authentic development to see nature as more important than the human person. Above I argued that this is not the best way to defend human dignity or the order of creation. Here, I go further: Benedict’s ecological ethic seems to establish an unnecessary polarity between humans and nature that is dissonant with a theology of creation.

When Benedict discusses the doctrine of creation, however, the theocentric leanings of his theology become more prominent. Truthfully, Benedict’s anthropocentric concerns never fully disappear, but a complementary theme of the theocentric dimension of creation becomes more audible. There is a good rationale for linking the cosmic common good to a theology of creation: focusing on creation focuses us on the Creator, and it allows us to perceive a common good that includes not only humans but also everything that exists. In his environmental ethic, Benedict wants to find a middle position between treating nature as raw material and treating nature as superior to the human person. Yet when positioning himself against atheism and relativism, Benedict is acutely aware of the danger of placing the human above creation and is quite strong against seeing the human as limitless in his powers. Here he does not treat the dual temptations of placing humanity radically above or radically below nature as equals. Instead, he rightly concentrates on the more dominant mindset. Benedict seems to reduce ecological ethics to the human stewardship of nature on behalf of the human common good such that there is little sense of creation’s existence oriented towards God. On the contrary, in his theology of creation, Benedict continually emphasizes the centrality of God in understanding nonhuman nature. Benedict’s environmental message is therefore weaker on the independent goodness of creation, and indeed weaker in its

⁵ For similar reasons I have proposed, instead, the promotion of “dignified subsistence” (see Scheid).

⁶ Moreover, Benedict’s assessment of what motivates environmental concern does not seem empirically accurate. He maintains that “when nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes.” (2009a: 48) Yet many of those most committed to environmental efforts are not religious communities but often composed of people who are nonreligious and sometimes atheists. The recent interest in “the greening” of theology (the papacy, Paul, etc.) is precisely because Christian and Catholic communities were not originally major supporters of this movement.

theocentrism, than his statements on creation, written in the context of combating atheism and relativism. Thus Benedict's ecological ethic is truncated in comparison with his own theology of creation, and expanding the meaning of the common good from integral human development to cosmic flourishing would bring his environmental teaching and his theology of creation into closer accord.⁷ The cosmic common good is a more theocentric ecological ethic, which is consistent with a robust Creator-centered theology of creation. While there certainly remain tensions within the cosmic common good over how to reconcile competing interests, the cosmic common good gives us a way to understand human flourishing within a broader theocentric context where creation does not exist merely for human wellbeing but for God's purposes as well.

Benedict's theology of creation, formulated before he was elected pope, bears this out. He repeatedly stresses that God loves all creatures and is concerned for them: "Because God is the Creator, he loves all his creatures" (Ratzinger 1997: 44). The themes of creation and covenant, Benedict argues, presuppose one another (Ratzinger 1986: 85), suggesting that creation is not merely a preamble to the story of salvation. In his first Christmas greeting to the Roman Curia, Benedict discusses the image of the pilgrim, the human journeying toward God, and he proposes that this image contains "the invitation not to see the world that surrounds us solely as raw material with which we can do something, but to try to discover in it 'the Creator's handwriting,' the creative reason and the love from which the world was born and of which the universe speaks to us, if we pay attention, if our inner senses awaken and acquire perception of the deepest dimensions of reality" (Benedict 2005). Attention to the Creator highlights the dignity of creation and its capacity to speak to us of God, and it warns us against seeing the world as "raw material." Benedict laments that the failure among theologians to talk about the theology of creation "leads to the worldlessness of faith and the godlessness of the world . . . Where creation shrinks to the world around us, human beings and the world are out of kilter. But, there is a complaint resounding ever more audibly out of this creation which has degenerated into mere environment, and precisely this complaint should tell us once more that the creature is in fact reaching out for the appearance of the children of God" (Ratzinger 1996: 65). Benedict cites Paul's Letter to the Romans⁸ approvingly, that all creation waits for the appearance of the children of God, and he even links it to environmental concerns. He thus seems to acknowledge that creation is much more than "mere environment" and that nonhuman creatures look to humanity because of their prior orientation to God. In limiting the common good to integral human development and seeming to shut the door on humanity's duty to nature *per se*, Benedict's ecological ethic falls prey to the same critique he makes of theologians who ignore the theology of creation:

⁷ In 2007, Lucia Silecchia predicted that it is very likely that "all ecological teachings of Pope Benedict XVI will emerge directly from his creation theology. As both a gift from and an expression of the Creator, the natural world is deserving of, and demands the respect of, humanity" (235). I do not mean to suggest that Silecchia is wrong or that Benedict has contradicted himself, just that Benedict's theology of creation is more theocentric in tone while his ecological ethic is more anthropocentric.

⁸ "For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21).

it tends to shrink creation to mere environment, as that which surrounds humans, which leads to the godlessness of the world. I would like to fill out this point with two further observations.

First, the cosmic common good is more adequate to the goodness of creation because it posits a paradigm in which nonhumans have intrinsic value. The cosmic common good, rooted in a theology of creation, offers an ethical construct that motivates concern for nonhumans, both because nonhuman nature serves human needs and because it is inherently good and loved by God for its own sake as creation. Benedict's ecological ethic seems to suggest that if something happens to nonhuman nature that does not either harm or benefit humans – i.e., there is no effect on the human common good – that there is no moral valence or consequence to that event. Should humans be concerned about the extinction of species when that extinction does not seem to impact human well-being? On the contrary, a cosmic common good offers a rationale for why such concern is theologically justified, which is a better reflection of each creature's intrinsic goodness.

Second, the cosmic common good offers a more adequate theological and scientific account of humanity's place in creation. As brothers Michael and Kenneth Himes argue, humanity shares creaturehood with other creatures, and our finite creatureliness is essential to understanding human dignity (Himes and Himes: 109-11). Humanity's place need not be central to creation in order to be dignified. Moreover, the cosmic common good presents a more honest assessment of humanity's place within this cosmos, which is massive in space and time. Given our place in the fourteen billion year history of the universe; given our biological co-evolution with other Earth creatures; given our radical dependence on Earth and its ecological systems for our survival; and I would add given our dependence on Earth for our psychological and spiritual well-being; there is no justification for limiting the common good of creation to integral human development. A cosmic common good emphasizes the centrality of God, the goodness of creation, and humanity's dignified but contextualized role within the story of creation.

Conclusion

As the papacy develops and Benedict XVI in particular continues to become more "green" and incorporate environmental themes into his teaching, he ought to develop an expansive vision of the common good from one that is merely integral human development to one that is planetary and even cosmic in scope. Doing so would broaden humanity's horizons beyond mere human wellbeing and inculcate a theocentric perspective that sees creation and the human person in a more realistic perspective and indeed allows a more authentic proclamation of the Gospel. There is, I believe, little reason to fear that such an emphasis would diminish the place or role of the human person. On the contrary, the cosmic common good stresses humanity's intrinsic and even elevated dignity within a community of creatures who possess intrinsic dignity. The cosmic common good is more consonant with the broader tradition of Catholic social teaching and Catholic social thought, and indeed with the history of Catholic theology. The cosmic common good represents a better prudential defense of creaturely dignity, human and otherwise, as well as a theocentric ecological ethic rooted in a proper theological understanding of creation.

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