

Ecocriticism's Middle Ages

(On Genesis 1:28b and Humankind's "Dominion over the Earth")

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The idea of "nature," which had been all but banished from post-structuralist critical discourse, is currently making a return under the banner of what is known as "ecocriticism." Whereas just a few years ago, the claim that "there is no nature" would have been highly uncontroversial in literary critical and philosophical circles, such a reduction of everything natural to the realm of "culture" is beginning to be seen as a potentially pernicious strategy by which rampant humanism, in the guise of self-critique, actually perpetuates and expands its power. If the past three decades have witnessed the merging of scholarship with the interests of various imagined human communities (e.g., feminism, post-colonial criticism, queer theory), there is now a trend toward scholarship that advocates the interests of the natural biosphere.

One emphasis of this emerging ecocriticism concerns the manner in which the understandings of "nature" prevalent in earlier historical periods either differed from or determined our present-day understandings. In various narratives reconstructing the past, contemporary ecologically-oriented scholars frequently summarize what they take to be the medieval view of nature, suggesting that this view played a substantial role in shaping modernity's destructive arrogance with respect to the non-human universe. Ecocritical attitudes toward the Middle Ages are generally hostile: much more often than not, the current ecological crisis is blamed on mentalities that supposedly were formed within the medieval tradition.¹

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on a single one of ecocriticism's charges against the Middle Ages: that the medieval Judeo-Christian tradition virtually unanimously asserts that the natural universe and its non-human beings were created to serve human needs. According to this ecocritical narrative, medieval thinkers

taught that man is superior to the rest of nature and that man was commanded by God to use all non-human beings for human ends. All created beings other than man find their ultimate *telos* or *raison d'être* in their utility as instruments for the achievement of human aims.

Several ecocritics locate the source of this supposed Judeo-Christian understanding of nature in Genesis 1:28 (more specifically, in Genesis 1:28b, the latter half of the following verse): "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" J. Baird Callicott, describing the prevailing ecocritical view of Genesis, sums up what he calls the "despotic interpretation" of this passage -- "Environ-mentally-oriented critics have claimed that since, according to Genesis, man is created in the image of God and given dominion over and commanded to subdue the earth and all its other creatures, Genesis clearly awards man a God-given right to exploit nature without moral restraint (except insofar as environmental exploitation may adversely affect man himself)."²

The classic statement of the ecocritical understanding of the early chapters of Genesis is Lynn White, Jr.'s 1967 article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." White sees the first book of the Bible as establishing for the Judeo-Christian tradition an inexorably destructive attitude toward nature:

Christianity had inherited from Judaism ... a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. *God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in*

the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes [emphasis added] ... Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.³

According to White, "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the current ecological crisis, which will continue until we reject the Christian axiom "that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."⁴

In this essay, I will challenge the axiomatic status of this supposed axiom. That is, I will suggest that White's version of the medieval Judeo-Christian tradition's attitude toward the non-human natural world is in need of substantial revision.⁵ I will do so not by denying the mainstream medieval tradition but precisely with the aid of that tradition. In other words, a critique of the idea that the *telos* of all created beings is to serve man can be located not *in spite of* medieval Christian and Jewish understandings of Genesis 1:28b but precisely *within* those understandings.

In fairness, it ought to be noted that White, himself a medievalist of great distinction (whose seminal work on medieval technology is much to be admired) does not think the Middle Ages should be entirely overcome. For White, there is one medieval hero, St. Francis, whom he proposes as the "patron saint of ecology." But Francis, presented as a radical or a revolutionary, functions as the single exception that proves the overwhelming dominance of the rule -- as if Francis is in some basic way not really medieval.

Published in the same year as White's influential essay, Roderick Nash's similarly influential *Wilderness and the American Mind* also presents the medieval understanding Genesis 1:28b as the root cause of an ecologically malignant mentality.

Again Francis is singled out, this time explicitly and literally, as exceptional in an era that otherwise could

only take an entirely anthropocentric position with regard to nature:

Among medieval Christians St. Francis of Assisi is the exception that proves the rule. He stood alone in a posture of humility and respect before the natural world. Assuming that birds, wolves, and other wild creatures had souls, St. Francis preached to them as to equals. This challenge to the idea of man as above, rather than of, the natural world might have altered the prevailing conception of wilderness. But the Church stamped St. Francis's beliefs as heretical. Christianity had too much at stake in the notion that God set man apart from and gave him dominance over the rest of nature (Genesis 1:28) to surrender it easily.⁶

White's and Nash's narrative concerning medieval attitudes toward nature is picked up time and again in later ecocritical writings. Max Oelschlaeger's 1991 *The Idea of Wilderness* provides a good example:

The views of Albert the Great..., a dominant intellectual figure and prolific writer, epitomize the medieval outlook on wild nature: God created nature to serve human needs. The medieval mind had no misgivings about Genesis I, for humankind was intended to have dominion over all creation.⁷

Oelschlaeger also repeats the by-now conventional trope that celebrates Francis as a solitary alternative: "Viewed from a contemporary standpoint, Francis abandoned the abiding Judeo-Christian presupposition of human superiority and replaced the anthropocentric outlook of the Bible with what is analogous in part to a biocentric perspective...Francis refused to see the natural world as organized around and serving human interests only."⁸

What I am calling "Ecocriticism's Middle Ages" is this basic narrative repeated again and again in some of the most celebrated works of the emerging ecocritical canon.⁹

According to this narrative, virtually all medieval thinkers endorsed a reading of Genesis 1:28b that undergirds human arrogance with respect to nature, insisting that all other beings (indeed the very physical universe itself) were created to serve man's purposes.

I do not contend that this ecocritical narrative is entirely wrong. There is, in fact, much that can be said in support of its accuracy. Some Church Fathers unambiguously asserted that all non-human beings were created expressly for human purposes. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, asserted that "human nature...was made to rule the rest" of nature and that "the animals were made because of man."¹⁰ Moreover, it is true that some medieval Christians used Genesis 1:28b to encourage humanity's unlimited exercise of technological mastery over and alteration of the natural world. Didymus the Blind (fourth century) understood humanity's "dominion over the earth" quite literally:

"And master of" signifies an extensive power, since one cannot say of him who has a limited power that he has dominion. God has made this gift to the human being...in order that land for growing and land for mining, rich in numerous, diverse materials, be under the rule of the human being. Actually, the human being receives bronze, iron, silver, gold, and many other metals from the ground; it is also rendered to him so that he can feed and clothe himself. So great is the dominion the human being has received over the land that he transforms it technologically -- when he changes it into glass, pottery, and other similar things. That is in effect what it means for the human being to rule "the whole earth."¹¹

But as shall become clear later in this essay, this literal reading of Genesis 1:28b is not the norm. Medieval exegetes most frequently understood "dominion" as an

allegory whose significance had little or nothing to do with nature.

It is undeniable that White, in formulating the basic ecocritical narrative of the medieval attitude toward nature, is describing a demonstrably Christian attitude. What is in question is whether this attitude is appropriately described as “medieval.” A late twentieth-century fundamentalist Christian tells us matter-of-factly that in Genesis 1:28b “God also gives man a job to do: fulfill God’s intention of man’s exercise of dominion over the earth.”¹² Does such an attitude really represent the lingering on of an older, medieval attitude toward nature, as White would suggest? Or is it rather a relative novelty, an essentially modern attitude? Did medievals really think that exercising dominion over the earth was their *imperative task*? Or is this thought possible only after modern capitalism and technology has made such domination both desirable (for some, namely those who possess capital) and to some degree achievable? White’s endeavor is to trace the “historical roots” of our ecological crisis. Yet he fails to consider that modernity has been “cut” from its medieval roots, in such a manner that modern Christian readings of Genesis 1:28b are by and large not in accord with medieval ones. Rather than our current crisis being the result of the survival of ancient and medieval understandings of nature, it may well be a result of our having forgotten those understandings.

Perhaps the most significant flaw in the ecocritical narrative as recounted by White and others is that it assumes that Genesis 1:28b could have appeared to medievals (as it certainly does to moderns) as an etiological verse (a verse meant to explain the past origin of a current state of affairs). The reading of Genesis 1:28b attributed to medieval readers by modern ecocritics assumes that humans *do in fact* have the power to exercise dominion over nature; and this reading assumes that the point of the verse is to recount the origin of and to justify our exercising this *currently held* power to master nature. Leaving out any mention of the Fall --

arguably the most important event in the story -- White fails to acknowledge that for a medieval reader, Genesis 1:28b does not describe the relation between humans and nature as it *really now is* but describes that relation as it *would be* in some other, prelapsarian or utopian world.

Indeed most medieval commentators regard Genesis 1:28b as telling not of the dominion over the earth that we currently do have but rather of the dominion that we might have had; but for the Fall and the subsequent expulsion from Eden. In other words, *medievales were not deluded into believing that they held mastery over nature*. This is clear in the early Christian *Epistle of Barnabas* (written around 100 AD), whose author indicates that human dominion over the earth and its creatures is not a reality *in this present world*; rather, it is a promise made to those humans who, through faith in Christ, may be perfected in the fullness of time. In achieving this future perfection, the faithful will regain a dominion that was lost as a consequence of the Fall:

But as it was already said above: "And they shall increase, and multiply, and rule over the fish."

Who, then, is presently able to rule over beasts or fish or birds of heaven? For we ought to understand that "to rule" implies that one is in control; so that he who gives the orders exercises dominion. *If, then, this is not the present situation*, he has told us when it will be -- when we ourselves have been perfected as heirs of the Lord's covenant.¹³

Barnabas assumes that his readers will accept as obvious that here-and-now, in the current state of affairs, we are not at all in control of nature. Not taking Genesis 1:28b's mention of dominion over the earth as a description of the present, he therefore does not attribute to the verse an etiological import. If medieval readers did in fact find an ecological message in the early chapters of Genesis, that message was most likely not to have been that humans *do or ought to* master nature but rather that humans cannot (since the Fall) master nature.

This notion that humans do not now have the capacity to exercise dominion over the earth remains a constant of medieval exegesis throughout the Middle Ages. As Jeremy Cohen says, summing up much of medieval Christian commentary concerning the issue of “dominion over the earth” in Genesis 1:28b: “When Adam and Eve ate from the tree and fell from paradise, they forfeited much of the dominion that once was theirs. Participating in the sinfulness of the first parents and inheriting their punishment, the descendants of Adam and Eve no longer enjoy the power that God intended his human creatures to have, a power that God will restore only with the final redemption.”¹⁴

Given that the final redemption is also the end of time, “dominion over the earth” will never be a temporal, literal reality. Those humans to whom the power of dominion will be restored will thereafter no longer inhabit the earth, the “dominion” that they will enjoy over the earth and its creatures will be a metaphorical and not an actual one. This “dominion over the earth” is generally understood allegorically as indicating that those humans whose souls are saved at the end of time will enjoy a fate --eternal life of the spirit -- superior to that of purely material and ultimately mortal beings. In temporal human history following the Fall, humans *never have had and never will have (literal) dominion over the earth*. And even if they did once have dominion, it was never meant to be unlimited: the ban placed by God on our appropriation of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was, as Cohen points out, taken to signify that there are ethical limits to our exploitation of the natural world.¹⁵

One might object to my point here by saying that medievals nonetheless imagined mastery over nature as a goal or ideal that a perfected or redeemed humankind would enjoy. Perhaps (one might surmise) medievals *would have* endorsed every effort to dominate the earth and its creatures, had they thought such domination possible.¹⁶ But the prevailing emphasis of medieval Christianity seems to be on getting Christians

accustomed to the idea that humans do not master nature and never will, not on urging them to try to master it. As the ecocritic Harold Fromm suggests, Christianity's counsel that humans turn away from "the world" did not stem so much from a belief that the world was "evil" as from an implicit *recognition* that humans could never be victorious in a contest with nature:

The idealized emphasis on "rational" in the concept of man as the rational animal which characterized Platonic-Christian thought for two millennia had generally been the product of man's sense of his own physical weakness, his knowledge that Nature could not be tamed or bent to his own will. In lieu of the ability to mold Nature to serve his own ends, man had chosen to extol and mythify that side of his being that seemed to transcend Nature by inhabiting universes of thought that Nature could not naysay... An approximation to spiritual perfection, however difficult, was a more realistic goal than that of bodily self-sufficiency or domination over Nature.¹⁷

Christianity, insofar as it renounced the message of immanence originally preached by Christ ("The Kingdom of God is at Hand") and began to foster a message of transcendence, is grounded on the assumption that humans never master nature. Christianity indeed depends upon the categorical denial of a literal reading of Genesis 1:28b. If Christianity has faded away as a viable worldview this is, as Fromm says, because now that we think that we can master nature we no longer need a message of transcendence as compensation for our lack of dominion over the earth.

I will now turn to an analysis of the question of humanity's "dominion over nature" as this question is treated by some of the most authoritative figures in the mainstream medieval Judeo-Christian tradition--Augustine, Aquinas, and Maimonides.

In the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine considers Genesis 1:28b in great detail. Understanding “dominion” as a synonym for the act of passing judgment, Augustine reads Genesis 1:28b as a directive concerning the proper boundaries of Christian judgment. The gist of his argument is that Christians ought not have “dominion” (i.e., ought not pass judgment) on anything or anyone that is outside their own Christian community. Church leaders have “dominion” over (the right to pass judgment concerning) the administration of church sacraments and, to some extent, over the members of their Church, but not over anything or anyone else; conversely, the members of a Church may have, to some extent, “dominion” over (the right to pass judgment concerning) the leaders of their Church. For Augustine, Genesis 1:28b has nothing to do with humankind’s relation to non-human nature and everything to do with some humans’ relations with other humans.

Augustine’s first point in his reading of Genesis 1:28b amounts to an insistence that the Bible does *not* give humans a general dominion over all of nature:

Likewise man, whom You made to Your image; has not received dominion over the light of heaven, nor over that mysterious heaven itself, nor over day and night, which you called into being before the creation of heaven, nor of the gathering together of the waters which is the sea; but over *the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and all the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moves upon the earth.*¹⁸

Even *if* Genesis 1:28b were to have given humans dominion over *any* non-human beings (and, *as we* shall see, Augustine’s exegesis ultimately denies this hypothetical), then that dominion *is* specific and limited, not general or absolute. We are perhaps to have dominion over some parts of nature but not over others. Augustine, who is nothing if not a close reader, reminds us that Genesis makes the following distinction: between

some parts of the physical creation over which man apparently has been given dominion (fish, birds, animals, earth, insects) and other parts of the physical creation over which man has no such dominion (e.g., the sea). Man has, Augustine emphasizes, dominion over fish but not over the ocean. Perhaps Augustine recognizes that humans are as a matter of nutritional necessity, constrained to impose themselves on other creatures; yet they are not mandated to “master” the environment--in this case the sea--in which those other creatures dwell. Whatever else this means, it is clear evidence that the lesson of Genesis, for Augustine, cannot possibly be that man has dominion over “all creation” (Oelschlaeger, cited above) nor over “the rest of nature” (Nash, cited above); nor can it be that “no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes” (White, cited above). Since Augustine emphasizes that man has apparently been given dominion over *some elements* of the created universe but not over others, one ought to at least be suspicious of the prevailing ecocritical narrative according to which Genesis teaches man’s absolute privilege with respect to all non-human elements of the created universe.

I say “apparently” because in fact the main thrust of Augustine’s exegesis of Genesis 1:28b is to *de-literalize* the scriptural account of man’s dominion. Augustine reads those limitations set on our dominion over nature as an indication that such dominion is not to be taken literally. The ecological implication of Augustine’s interpretation is: man has been given dominion over *no elements* of the created universe, since when scripture *appears* to say that we have dominion over some elements of creation (fish, birds, animals, earth, insects) these very elements do not really signify anything natural but rather are *allegorical signifiers for entirely cultural phenomena*. Following directly after the passage just cited, Augustine interprets those creatures over which we have been given dominion as if they stand for sacraments and/or members of a Christian community. Speaking of

the good leader of such a community (he who has been given “dominion” or the right to pass judgment), Augustine says the following:

He judges, and approves what he finds good, and blames what he finds evil, whether in the ministration or the sacraments by which those are initiated whom Your mercy has sought out from the midst of many waters; or in that ceremony figured by the Fish raised from the depths which the pious “earth” eats; or in the significations of words, and the voices subjected to the authority of your Book which fly like the fowls of the air under the firmament -- interpreting, expounding, discussing, disputing, praising You and calling upon You, words coming from the mouth and sounding forth that the congregation may answer Amen...The spiritual man judges also by approving what he finds good and blaming what he finds evil in the works and morals of the faithful, in their almsgiving which is symbolized by the fruitful earth.¹⁹

In Augustine’s reading, the “fishes of the sea” signify those people who have been recruited from various locales (“fished” out from “many waters”) to become members of a Christian church. The “fish” also signify the Eucharist consumed by a Christian community who are called “the earth.” The “birds” (“fowls of the air”) stand for human readings and interpretations of scripture. The “earth” signifies both the community of the faithful and acts of charity *performed* by members of this community. Augustine reads Genesis 1:28b as *if every signifier that might be taken as a representation of a non-human being or practice ought really to be taken as a signifier representing human beings or human practices*. For him, the verse is not at all about humanity’s relation to non-human nature but rather about some humans’ relations to other humans. Some humans have been given dominion not over nature, but rather over “the

works and morals of the faithful.” Dominion does not at all extend the realm of the Other: humans are not lord over that which is non-human, nor are any humans lord over other humans who are not members of their own community (“Nor does any man though spiritual judge of the troubled citizens of the world. For what has he in his ignorance to do to judge them that are without?”²⁰). The ecological thrust of Augustine’s exegesis of Genesis 1:28b is the strict delimitation of the realm of human dominion. The only valid dominion is that judgment proper to members of a self same community: authorities can judge the practices of their subjects, and subjects can judge the practices of their authorities. For Augustine, the only imperative delivered by Genesis 1:28b is that humans ought to have dominion over their own human institutions.

Augustine is quite strident in telling us not to read this part of Genesis literally. In *On Genesis: Against the Manichees*, he uses the patent falsity or absurdity of Genesis 1:30 (“And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so.”) as proof that the passage in which Genesis establishes human dominion over the earth is pure allegory. For it is simply not true that every kind of animal is herbivorous. We cannot take the passage literally (or, as Augustine puts it, “carnally”) -- as if it presented true facts about nature -- since it is obvious that the passage is factually incorrect:

We should also be warned not to understand these matters carnally from the fact that in Genesis the green plants and fruit-bearing trees were given to every kind of animal and to all the birds and to all the reptiles as food. Yet we see that lions, hawks, kites, and eagles feed only on meat and the killing of other animals. I believe this is also true of some serpents which live in sandy desert areas where there are neither trees nor grass.²¹

Taken as “natural science” (as a description of the “way natural things really are”), this part of Genesis, says Augustine, must be deemed illegitimate. As Augustine points out in *On Christian Doctrine*, some things recorded in Scripture, if taken literally, are manifestly absurd. Such absurdity is, for Augustine, a sure indicator that such passages are allegory. Evidently Augustine finds it absurd to take the notion of humankind’s dominion over the earth and its creatures literally. Accordingly, Augustine’s incomplete *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* abruptly ends with his gloss of Genesis 1:27. One might playfully speculate that his work halted there at least in part because he was unable to take Genesis 1:28 literally. At any rate, Augustine’s effort to read Genesis literally fails to provide the medieval Christian tradition with a literal Augustinian interpretation of Genesis 1:28b. This Augustinian insistence that Genesis 1:28b is not about nature but about culture, not about humanity’s relation to non-human nature but about some humans’ relations to other humans, clearly survived as the dominant interpretation throughout the Middle Ages. The thirteenth century Oxford bishop and theologian Robert Grosseteste, for instance, repeats Augustine’s claim that the import of the passage is not its contribution to a scientific knowledge of the material world: “The legislator [Moses] did not seek to instruct us in the nature of marine creatures as much as in the regulation of the Church and in matters of behavior.”²² For Grosseteste, the lesson of Genesis 1:28b concerns ethics (moral philosophy), not physics (natural philosophy). It tells some humans something about how they ought to comport themselves with respect to themselves; it does not tell humanity anything about how humans ought to comport themselves with respect to non-human beings.

The ecocritical narrative relies on the assumption that medievals read scripture literally. But throughout the Middle Ages, passages such as Genesis 1:28 -- which was patently absurd since it was manifest that humans did not master nature -- were taken as allegories. The

issue is nicely summed up by Jeremy Cohen in his book on the medieval Jewish and Christian reception of Genesis 1:28: "When Christian writers did elaborate on the dominion granted humans in Genesis 1:28...rarely, if ever, did they perceive the primordial blessing as a commandment to conquer and subdue the forces of the physical world... Christian exegetes...[read] it as an allegory of the soul or of Christ and his church....Among both rabbis and churchmen, the nature that was of doctrinal concern was not that of the physical environment---but that of the human being."²³

There is no doubt that Genesis 1:28b has frequently been invoked as justification for human projects of altering and appropriating the physical environment (as Nash shows, the verse was used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans as part of an exhortation to convert the "wilderness" of the frontier lands into "civilized" farms and towns²⁴). What is in doubt is whether *medievales* used the verse in such manner, and hence whether it is legitimate to suggest, as White and so many ecocritics do, that there are substantial medieval "roots" to our current ecological crisis.

The great philosopher and theologian Meister Eckhart, who flourished around the turn of the fourteenth century, similarly reads Genesis 1:28b in an allegorical manner. For Eckhart, the verse teaches human leaders that they ought, above all, be rational in their exercise of dominion: "one who cannot rule over his own passions should not rule over others."²⁵ Repeating an allegorical reading that was commonplace since at least the early third century when it was formulated by Origen, Eckhart regards the "beasts" that human leaders ought to subdue not as real animals but as their own human passions. Then, as if to compensate for having had to denigrate fish in order to produce this gloss (Eckhart *says* that reason is superior to passion as humans are superior to fish), he turns to drawing a lesson in "animal rights" from the following verse, Genesis 1:29 ("See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the

face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food”). Eckhart insists that this verse be read as an imperative to vegetarianism: “Note how little food is ordained for the human species: there is no mandate for humans to use meat -- which is why the teacher [Vincent of Beauvais] says that we do not read of Christ having eaten any meat except the Paschal lamb.”²⁶ Eckhart continues by citing various authorities -- Ovid, Boethius, Seneca -- who agree that humans were not meant to be carnivorous. Clearly, Eckhart’s intent is to disarm the apparent imperative of Genesis 1:28b (it being potentially destructive to animals) by using Genesis 1:29 to undermine a literal reading of Genesis 1:28b. This insistence on a vegetarian Christ, coming right from the center of the medieval tradition (Eckhart was a philosophy professor at the University of Paris when he wrote these words), is evidence that the lesson of Genesis 1:28b for medieval Christians, is not primarily one of human “dominance over” the animals (White’s phrase, cited above).

Thomas Aquinas plays an important role in the ecocritical narrative, since he is frequently taken to be the villain responsible, more than anyone else, for the idea that the universe was created solely to suit human purposes. Paul Shepard, for whom “medieval Christianity...portrayed humans as the central fact in the universe,” claims that the current prevailing philosophy of anti-nature and human omniscience” is an attitude “whose modern form was shaped when Aquinas reconciled Aristotelian homocentrism with Judeo-Christian dogma...For such a philosophy, nothing in nature has inherent merit. As one professor recently put it, “The only reason anything is done on this earth is for people.”²⁷ George Sessions associates Aquinas with what he calls “The ecologically destructive ‘anthropocentric detour’” (implying that Aquinas is, in large part, responsible for sending us down the “wrong road”): “In the medieval Christian synthesis of Saint Thomas Aquinas...Aristotle’s anthropocentric cosmology was quite

compatible with Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism....In summarizing the medieval culmination of Greek and Christian thought, philosopher Kurt Baier remarked: "The medieval Christian world picture assigned to man a highly significant, indeed the central part in the grand scheme of things. The universe was made for the express purpose of providing a stage on which to enact a drama starring Man in the title role."²⁸ And Roderick Nash similarly suggests that Aquinas complacently celebrated man as the ultimate *telos* of creation: "Scholastic logic held that as man was made to serve God, so the world was made for the benefit of man."²⁹

This ecocritical image of Aquinas can only be constructed by neglecting a great deal of what Aquinas actually wrote concerning the purposes for which the universe was made. Far from claiming that the universe was made for humankind, Aquinas consistently endorses what might be called an "agnostic" position: we cannot know why the universe is as it is, other than to know that God willed it that way. God's actions, says Aquinas, were not determined "by some ultimate goal." Aquinas, in effect, denies that things were created such as they are that they might be useful to man. Rather, they were created in such manner simply because it was God's will to do so:

If you want to know why the heavens are so big and not bigger, the only answer is that he who made it wanted it that size. And that, according to Moses Maimonides, is why scripture urges us to look at the stars, since their order above all shows how everything is subject to the will and providence of the creator. There is no answer to the question why this star is that far from that star -- or any other such question about the order of the heavens -- except that God planned it so in his wisdom.³⁰

What is important about the "order" of the stars is nothing other than their very *lack* of order.³¹ Looking at the stars, humans do not see a perfect and orderly

distribution of things. Instead they see an apparently haphazard distribution that teaches them that they cannot fathom God's intent. Certainly the answer to the question, "Why is the cosmos such?" is *not* "Because this is the order that most perfectly suits human needs." Moreover, Aquinas explicitly denies that one creature (i.e., man) can be set apart from the rest of the universe so as to function as its explanation or *raison d'être*: "When we talk of the bringing into existence of the whole universe, there is no other created thing which can be used to explain why the universe is as it is."³²

Elsewhere, Aquinas ventures to offer a somewhat less "agnostic" explanation for the universe's being as it is. Yet, the idea that man is the universe's purpose is conspicuously absent:

Now from all this it is clear that God's providence, when it distributes a variety of properties and activities and changes and spatial arrangements to the things it has created, has its reasons. That is why sacred scripture ascribes the production and management of things to God's wisdom and discretion, saying...*You have ordered all things by measure, number, and weight* (Wisdom 11 [20]), meaning by measure the amount or mode or degree of perfection in each thing, by number the *diversity and plurality of species* [emphasis added] that results from these degrees of perfection, and by weight the *diverse attractions to specific goals and activities* [emphasis added], agents and patients, and properties resulting from the *diversity of species* [emphasis added].

Now in the hierarchy of reasons behind God's providence just described we have placed first God's own goodness: the ultimate goal as it were which first starts activity off; and after that the *manyness of things* [emphasis added], which in turn required the different degrees of forms and matters, agents and patients, activities and

properties. So just as the absolutely first reason behind God's providence is God's goodness, so *the first reason within creation is manyness in things, to set up and maintain which everything else seems to be ordered* [emphasis added].³³

Here Aquinas distinguishes between the "absolute" reason behind the universe and a secondary reason. Insofar as God is the reason for the universe, one cannot designate anything in the universe itself -- neither a species of creature nor a principle -- as being its reason. The "ultimate goal which first starts activity [creation] off" is clearly *not* man. One cannot attribute to Aquinas the idea that "the universe was made for the express purpose of providing a stage on which to enact a drama starring Man in the title role" (Baier, cited above). Nor is man even the secondary reason behind creation. Insofar as there is a reason for the universe *in the universe itself*, this reason has nothing to do with human interests. The universe is as it is for no reason other than that there might be "manness in things." For Aquinas, *the ultimate purpose of the universe is nothing other than its own diversity*. The plurality and diversity of species -- what contemporary ecologists call "biodiversity" -- is ranked second only to God's goodness in the hierarchy of the universe's *raison d'être*.

Ecocritics routinely claim that Aquinas (and medieval thinkers as a whole), denying the *intrinsic value* of all non-human created beings, taught that the things of the universe do not exist for their own sake but for the sake of humankind. The well-known deep ecologist Paul Shepard, for instance, attributes to Aquinas the assertion that "nothing in nature has inherent merit" (cited above). Such a presentation of Aquinas's position is at best incomplete, if not entirely erroneous. For Aquinas, in fact, taught that there is a plurality of reasons for the existence of any created being, *the primary reason being that it exists for its own sake*: "Now if we wish to assign an end to any whole, and to the parts of that whole, we shall find, first, that each and every part exists for the

sake of its own proper act and perfection.”³⁴ This notion that all non-human entities have inherent worth is fundamental to current attempts to promote a new environmental ethic.³⁵

Aquinas’ thinking on environmental ethics at times approaches a degree of sophistication that compares favorably with the best of our contemporary ecocritics. Consider, for instance, Aquinas’ stunningly subtle commentary on Moses’ writing the creation story in Genesis. The idea that the natural universe is made *solely* for human use and does not itself have inherent value (the very idea attributed to Aquinas by ecocritics) is, says Aquinas, a *rhetorical trick* used by Moses in order to gain the favorable disposition of his followers. Aquinas proposes the fascinating thesis that Moses intentionally overemphasized the utility of non-human beings for human purposes so as to “disenchant” the things of nature and to persuade a polytheistic people that the one true God was supremely benevolent. Remarking that, as the author of Genesis, “Moses describes what is obvious to sense, out of condescension to popular ignorance,” Aquinas says that Moses reduced the plurality of reasons for the existence of creatures to a single one (utility for human purposes): “As we have said above, a corporeal creature can be considered as made either for the sake of its proper act, or for other creatures, or for the whole universe, or for the glory of God, of these reasons only that which points out the usefulness of these things to man, is touched upon by Moses, in order to withdraw his people from idolatry.”³⁶ Fearing that his people, who in the beginning were still prone to worship natural things and creatures, would never embrace a transcendental monotheism, Moses stripped things of all intrinsic worth. This is not so much because Moses thought that things really were devoid of intrinsic worth, but rather because he thought that such a doctrine would further his aims. Suggesting that the Hebrew scriptures do not give an absolutely correct picture of “reality,” Aquinas indicates that Genesis presents a skewed vision of nature. The

creation story in Genesis is an intentional distortion (or, at least a reduction) of reality that is justified by the importance of Moses' world-historical mission. If the early chapters of Genesis appear to indicate that the universe was made for humans, this is because in writing Genesis Moses was catering to "popular ignorance," hoping to entice people with the idea that all other things were meant to serve them. The great Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides, whose *Guide of the Perplexed* served as a basic foundation of Christian scholastic philosophy, offers the most remarkable evidence that there is a mainstream medieval Judeo-Christian understanding of nature diametrically opposed to the one attributed to the Middle Ages by the prevailing ecocritical narrative. Maimonides denies that Genesis commands humans to exercise dominion over nature. Genesis does not tell humans how they should act toward nature; rather, it tells them something about the relative *quality* of their own nature:

Be not misled by its saying with regard to the stars, *To give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night*, so that you think it means: in order that they should do this. It is merely information about their nature, which He willed to create thus -- I mean, giving light and ruling. Similarly, it says of man, *And have dominion over the fish of the sea and so on*, which dictum does not mean that man was created for the sake of this, but merely gives information about man's nature with which He, may He be exalted, has stamped him.³⁷

For Maimonides, Genesis does not present humans with an *imperative*; it does not assert that "they should do this" (i.e., dominate nature). It says nothing about how we ought to comport ourselves with respect to non-human entities. Maimonides reads "dominion" not as a description of how humans ought to act toward other beings but as a description of humankind's relative position in a hierarchy of beings. Genesis 1:28b does not

tell us what to do, it tells us something of what we are (we are “above” some other creatures when measured on a vertical scale of rationality--for better or worse an apparent truth that even the most committed contemporary ecocritic would be hard pressed to deny). But though Genesis may tell us how we stand in relation to other creatures on a scale of rationality, it does not translate this standing into any counsel concerning how we ought to comport ourselves with respect to those creatures. To say that humans are more rational than other creatures does not entail an ethic of active domination.

It was Maimonides who more than anyone else established the position, later echoed by Aquinas and Christian scholasticism,³⁸ that all created beings have intrinsic value and are not primarily intended to serve human interests:

The correct view according to the beliefs of the Law...is as follows: *It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man* [emphasis added]. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else.³⁹

Concerning those things (heavens, earth, seas, plants, animals, etc.) about whose creation Genesis tells, Maimonides forcefully denies that they were created for the sake of humankind: “with reference to none of them is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other thing.”⁴⁰

It would be hard to imagine a more stark and forceful contradiction to the ecocritical representation of medieval environmental ethics. For Maimonides, like present-day deep ecologists, teaches that all created entities have their own inherent worth and their own purposes. Maimonides crowns this doctrine with his rendering of Proverbs 16:4, which is sometimes translated so as to mean that everything is created not for its own sake but for the sake of God: “The Lord has made all for Himself”

(New King James Version [1982]). Maimonides, calling our attention to the fact the Hebrew phrase is ambiguous (the possessive pronoun may be read either as "His" or as "its"), reads the verse as evidence that all things have their own autonomous value; "The Lord hath made everything for *its* sake."⁴¹ The difference between the New King James rendering and the one given primacy by Maimonides entails the difference between treating the things of nature as if they were made for the sake of some other, intelligent being (the Lord or, by extension, "Lord Man" -- to use John Muir's felicitous phrase) or as if their reason for being were simply autonomous, independent from the intentions or designs of any such other.

Elsewhere in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides takes pains to "decenter" humankind's position in the universe. That is, he insists in a variety of ways that humanity ought not see itself as the be-all and end-all of the cosmos. We cannot provide a correct explanation for the universe, other than to say that it was assuredly not created for us:

If, however, it is believed that all this [i.e., the cosmos] came about in virtue of the purpose of one who purposed who made this thus, that opinion would not be accompanied by a feeling of astonishment and would not be at all unlikely. And there would remain no other point to be investigated except if you were to say; What is the cause for this having been purposed? What is known may be epitomized as follows: *All this has been produced for an object that we do not know* and is not an aimless and fortuitous act.⁴²

All that exists was intended by Him, may He be exalted, according to His volition. And we shall seek for it no cause or final end whatever...Hence be not misled in your soul to think that the spheres and the angels have been brought into existence for our sake. For it has

explained to us what we are worth: *Behold the nations are as a drop of a bucket* [Isaiah 40:15].⁴³

If it is true that Darwinism shook up (and still shakes up) modern humans by questioning their centrality and privilege, it can only be because modern humans have forgotten this medieval tradition that recognized that we are “as a drop of a bucket.”

Far from being the era in which were planted the seeds of today’s overblown human arrogance, the medieval period was marked by the sort of humility that may prove fundamental in the formulation of a positive environmental ethic for the next millennium.

NOTES:

1. There are, of course, notable exceptions: Neil Evernden, in *The Social Construction of Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992), presents the Middle Ages in a favorable light, urging a retrieval of a medieval attitude toward the natural world. And Christopher Manes calling our attention to the Ecostery Project, an effort by some deep ecologists to reinstitute the medieval monastery as a social reality, recognizes that “medieval discourse...at times revealed a refined sense of human limitation and respect for otherness” (“Nature and Silence,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed, C. Glotfelty and H. Fromm [Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996], pp. 25-26).
2. J. Baird Callicott, *Earth’s Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 15.
3. Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, p. 9; originally published in *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 12, p. 14.

5. As Callicott (*Earth's Insights*, p. 237) has noted, White's thesis has provoked a "veritable flood of apologetic literature too vast to cite in its entirety;" Callicott nonetheless provides a good bibliography of those who have asserted, *contra* White, that the Judeo-Christian tradition ought to be seen not as the problem but rather as part of the solution to the current ecological crisis.
6. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 19.
7. Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 72.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. Among the countless further examples that could be invoked, I will here cite just one. David Macauley lists "the Judaic and Christian religious traditions" along with overpopulation and pollution as one of the "roots, forms, and manifestations of ecological and social problems." *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology*, ed. David Macauley (New York: Guilford, 1996), p. 3.
10. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 4.1, 8.3. Trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory Bishop of Nyssa*. Text taken from the Internet site "Christian Classics Ethereal Library" (<http://ccel.wheaton.edu>).
11. Cited in Jeremy Cohen, *"Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It": The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 227.
12. The citation is from "David Guzik's Study Guide to Genesis I," found on the "Blue Letter Bible Project Website" (www.khouse.org/blueletter).
13. Cited in Cohen, p. 225; emphasis added.
14. Cohen, p. 229.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 228. See also Callicott's forceful pro-environmental reading of Genesis in his *Earth's Insights*, pp. 17-21.

16. It is certainly true that medieval humans altered their environment through agricultural and technological practices, as several of the articles in *L'homme at la nature au moyen âge* (Paris: Errance, 1996) make clear. But whether such alteration can rightly be called (or was considered) "domination" is another question.
17. Harold Fromm, "From Transcendence to Obsolescence," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, pp. 30-31.
18. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.23. Trans. F. J. Sheed, *Confessions* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 278.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Saint Augustine, *Against the Manichees* 1.20. Trans. Roland J. Teske, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 84 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p. 79.
22. Robert Grosseteste, *Hexameron* 6.12.1; cited in Cohen, p. 264.
23. Cohen, p. 268.
24. Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 31.
25. Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri genesis*, in Meister Eckhart, *Die lateinischen Werke* 1.2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), p. 163. Trans. mine.
26. Ibid.
27. Paul Shepard, "Ecology and Man -- A Viewpoint," in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), p.136.
28. George Sessions, "Ecocentrism and the Anthropocentric Detour," in *Deep Ecology*, p. 160.
29. Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 193.
30. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* 3.17. Trans. from Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 266.
31. Evernden (*Social Construction*, p. 119), citing the following passage from naturalist Richard Jeffries, proposes that this sort of recognition of the

universe's *lack of order* is fundamental in the formulation of a pro-environmental ethic: "When at last I had disabused my mind of the enormous imposture of a design, an object, and an end, a purpose or system, I began to see dimly how much more grandeur, beauty and hope there is in divine chaos -- not chaos in the sense of disorder or confusion but simply the absence of order -- than there is in a universe made by pattern." Richard Jeffries, *Landscape with Figures* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 244.

32. Aquinas, *Selected*, p. 266.
33. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.97. Trans. from Aquinas, *Selected*. pp. 272-73.
34. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.65.2. Trans. from *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 1 (New York: Beringer Brothers, 1947), p. 326.
35. One might note that the words of the nineteenth-century nature writer, John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, echo the scholastic insistence that all beings are primarily created for their own sake: "It never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one." John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*. ed. William Frederic Badè (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916). pp.138-39.
36. *Summa Theologica* 1.70.2. Trans. *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, p. 347.
37. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.13.26a. Trans. Shlomo Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), vol. 2, p. 454.
38. In his "Ecocentrism and the Anthropocentric Detour," Sessions represents Maimonides and Aquinas as polar opposites, the former signaling the pro-environmental "road not taken" by subsequent Western thought. But this is a superficial

falsification of the real relation between the great Jewish and Christian thinkers of the late Middle Ages. In fact, Aquinas is everywhere indebted to Maimonides, citing him on innumerable occasions, including in some of the very passages that I have treated above.

39. *Guide* 3.13.24b. Trans. Pines, p. 457.
40. Later in the same passage, Maimonides contradicts this, saying plants were made for the sake of animals. Yet one must note that this does not mark a fall into anthropocentrism, since he does *not* say that plants were made for humans; rather, Maimonides groups together “the Adamites [i.e., humans] and the other animals” as those for whose sake plants were created.
41. *Guide* 3.13.24b. Trans. Pines, p. 452. The New American Standard Bible Update (1995) translates the verse in a way that is in accord with Maimonides’ interpretation: “the Lord has made everything for its own purpose.”
42. *Guide* 2.19.44a. Trans. Pines, p. 310; emphasis added.
43. *Guide* 3.13.26b. Trans. Pines, p. 454-55.