

To Use and To Enjoy: Augustine and Ecology

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Introduction

Christian theology has largely failed the challenge of the mounting environmental crisis facing the earth and its inhabitants. It is sometimes claimed that the Judeo-Christian worldview is actually responsible for the crisis (most famously in the 1967 article by Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis').¹ If this claim is excessive, it certainly remains true that Christians have managed to do little to slow the Western world's march towards environmental degradation. It may be fair to say even that the West's failure has had a particular quasi- or pseudo-Christian character, our exploitative actions and attitudes clothed in patches of biblical and theological justification torn from the context and fabric of a tradition which actually claims and undergirds a different, more authentic, faith and practice.

The mistakes have been various. Theologies of prosperity have focussed on success for individuals in the social and economic order, rather than on the shape of that order itself or its organic connection with the natural world. Theologies claiming the imminent end of history, and/or the relatively low importance of embodied existence, have taught Christians to care little about the state of an embattled earth. Even more moderate and circumspect theologies have tended to focus on the human predicament in the light of God's promises and demands, and have not equipped us well to see human existence as part and parcel of 'this fragile earth, our island home', as a prayer of The Episcopal Church's liturgy depicts God's creation.

It is therefore understandable that theologies have emerged which criticize or simply reject certain key assumptions in earlier patterns of Christian thought. A few common themes are prominent in such reflections: one is the critique of anthropocentrism or of views understood to be human-centred in an exclusive or reductionist way; another the tendency to prefer some form of panentheism—a view in which God is present (only) within the world—over traditional transcendent understandings of God’s relationship with the world; and closely related to both is a rejection of dualism, or of radical distinctions posited not only between God and the world or between humanity and nature, but metaphysical categories such as matter and spirit, which seems to undermine the necessity to value and nurture the world itself.²

I assume a different sort of relationship between ideas and practice than such revisionist eco-theologies or Lynn White’s 1967 argument hold. Just as it is wrong to suggest that the present crisis, which extends across many cultures, is the result of a single philosophical or religious position, so too it is unhelpful to insist that appropriate responses to that crisis are dependent on wholesale acceptance or rejection of a specific theology. Ironically, such insistence reflects the exclusive and somewhat imperialistic thought-patterns that the Christian West has practised for centuries, and even when it criticizes those patterns.

This does not mean that Christian theology can avoid the challenges of the environmental crisis. If we must change the prospects for the earth itself, different

theologies and world-views will have to cooperate, within the Church and certainly beyond it. We must work with those in whom we recognize an affinity based on faith and baptism (for the Church), or on our common human stewardship of creation (in the wider community), whether or not our prospective partners have the same understandings. Without such a willingness to see how those from whom we differ can be co-workers for the reign of God, our labour for God's world will be in vain.

So we might yet reflect not only on the problems in earlier uses of Christian thought, but also on how orthodox Christian theology—the great tradition of Christian thought, and in particular that which seeks inspiration in the ancient writers known as Fathers of the Church—demands from Christians, and promises to them, a richer understanding of the earth and our participation in its life. I also suggest that this tradition of Christian thought has advantages, not only related to whatever inherent value is attributed to orthodoxy and its practical usefulness in galvanizing mainstream Christians, but because it has the potential to address at least some of the critiques from recent ecotheologies.

Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), bishop of a relatively obscure North African town, was one of the most influential of all Christian theologians, in his own time and ever since. Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* in particular still attract a wide readership, and he is a significant figure for both Catholic and Protestant theological traditions.³

Yet Augustine tends to be an unpopular figure for those attempting to reflect more positively about human life and the natural world. His doctrine of Original Sin and his somewhat pessimistic anthropology (in contrast to that of his opponent Pelagius), and particularly a focus on the problematic character of human sexuality in lived experience, have made him a pin-up villain for some liberal and progressive theologies, including those particularly concerned with the environment.

Augustine probably needs to be commended more seriously to his detractors, and criticized to his fans. He was a man of his time and his limitations are real; some of them have been linked to problematic legacies of contemporary Christianity around gender and sexuality, although here as elsewhere he is rarely treated carefully enough in popular discussions.

My purpose however is not to praise him but to use him, as may become clearer below. His conception of the God-world relationship, while for some deeply dualistic, is arguably helpful for Christians who wish to think about how the gospel may lead to a deeper commitment to, and appreciation for, the natural environment.⁴

What follows is a brief reading of Augustine's world-view and of the contemporary environmental challenge in terms of each other; it cannot do justice to either. Three themes will be developed. First, I will discuss the problem of dualism in terms wider than Augustine's work alone, in order to seek an authentically Christian response both to dualistic positions and to anti-dualistic critiques of orthodox Christianity. Second, I

will seek to expound more positively the cosmology suggested by Augustine's work, giving attention to its enormously positive account of creation along with a transcendent view of the creator. Third, I will discuss the Augustinian distinction between 'use' and 'enjoyment' of different elements of the creation, which has been problematic but which offers positive opportunities for ongoing thought and practice.

Dualisms

Dualism refers to any philosophical or religious system where two fundamental realities (such as matter and spirit, or good and evil) are understood to co-exist, either eternally or at least in general experience, and often in some tension.

In the strictest sense dualism is incompatible with orthodox Christian theology, which claims the transcendent God is the only ultimate and original reality. Dualism can also be used more loosely, however, of systems where strong but less absolute distinctions are made between aspects of being. The most common, and most relevant, dualisms of this sort involve a distinction between material and spiritual principles or realities, especially where a moral as well as a merely metaphysical distinction means the spiritual is valued more highly than the material.

The most radical forms of dualism tend even to correlate spirit and matter with good and evil, respectively. The ancient religious tradition known as Manichaeism, for instance, suggested that the material world was inherently bad, and that the believer's hope was effectively to escape it. Augustine was for some time an adherent of this

movement, admiring its ascetic seriousness and the account it gave of the obvious evils present in the world. His awareness of this position later helped inform his very different cosmology, whose articulation is one of his great contributions to Christian thought.

Although the Christian account of creation is fundamentally different from Manichaean dualism, readers of the Bible will recall echoes of such radical distinctions. Most obviously, the Pauline language of 'flesh' and the Johannine terminology of 'world' use these particular ideas as metonyms – words related to the thing they are concerned to speak of, but used as though they were the thing itself.

It is important to understand these: although John's Gospel at times speaks of the 'world' as shorthand for human and cosmic evil (John 7:7, 8:23, 14:17) at other points it is clear that the 'world' is precisely what Jesus has come to save (above all, of course, 3:16; cf. 6:33, 8:12 etc.).

Similarly, Paul's use of 'flesh' to speak about forms of human life that are self-serving and egocentric does not actually entail a rejection of human flesh (see Rom 7-8; cf. 1:3, 9:5); Paul can also speak of the body as a temple (1 Cor 6:19; cf. 3:16-17) and he looks for the renewal of embodied existence in the resurrection (1 Cor 15).

Yet the use of these terms reflects a widespread ancient view that matter itself was not only a lesser sort of reality than spirit, but inherently problematic. Greek and Roman

philosophers tended to see matter as eternal, not created; it had existed along with spiritual things for ever, but was formed or animated into the cosmic order we know by the infusion or imprint of spiritual or heavenly reality. This logic does not make matter evil, but certainly draws a stark distinction between its value and that of spiritual and intellectual things. Such a philosophical system is a genuine form of dualism, which is distinct from Christian theology but has had some influence on it.

Some forms of Christian belief have seen the very fact of material existence, and human embodiment in particular, as reflecting the biblical analysis of the human and cosmic condition as sinful or fallen. Yet of course the Judeo-Christian account of creation depicts the material world, including human bodies, as an intended part of the divine order. The fact of material existence says nothing in itself about what ails us as human race, or as fallen universe.

A more authentic Christian understanding rejects a strict dualism of matter and spirit, granted that it may make other important distinctions between them. Augustine's own struggle with these issues offers the possibility that it might be better, at least initially, to think of Christianity as a distinctive sort of monism, a world-view affirming one sole, ultimate reality. This position, also more akin to the Neo-Platonism that influenced his departure from Manichean dualism but not alien to the theology of the Hebrew Bible either, suggests God not to be seen merely as one uniquely important or powerful (and 'spiritual') person or object among others, but as transcending normal understandings of 'spirit' as much as of 'matter'.

All spiritual and material realities alike come into being through God's gratuitous creative work, and all are contingent, having their original source and their ultimate meaning from and in God. God is the sole self-existent reality, utterly transcendent of creation, but bringing it into existence as a free act.

In that case the differences between one element of creation and another may be significant for many purposes, but not relative to the shared dependence all things have on God. Recognition of God's uniqueness and transcendence has a levelling effect on assumptions that would devalue one set of created things relative to another. Theologies which assume that the spiritual is in itself superior to the embodied or material, and which derive ethical norms from such observation, are dubious. They tend to consider God merely as a higher or better object of contemplation or analysis than others and hence posit a God-world relationship which is characterized by hierarchy, rather than by gratuity or gift. Augustine's path from Manichean dualism to a Christianity emphasizing divine transcendence results in a world-view that interprets hierarchy always and only in terms of divine gift.⁵

God's World: The Order of Love and the Will to Power

How then are Christians to understand the character of the cosmos, including its intended diversity and its problematic imperfection, in the light of faith in the transcendent creator God?

Augustine speaks of the intended order and beauty of the world, only partially known to us in its present state, as an order of love, *ordo amoris*.⁶ The diversity of material and spiritual things is divinely intended, and inherently good. Any sense of hierarchy—and there certainly is one for Augustine—must be interpreted solely in terms of beauty and love; power is not itself the character of cosmic diversity, beauty is. Love is the purpose with which God creates, and the order to which God calls. When power or order serves its own ends and not those of God, it is perverse.

All things are good, in that they exist and thereby have their own way of being, their own appearance and in a sense their own peace (*City of God* 12.5).

The perverse employment of power is the key to Augustine's understanding of sin itself. Since God is the creator of all, evil is not part of God's will, yet has no source external to God (such as the Manichean alternative principle of evil, or some quasi-Christian accounts of the Devil). Evil appears solely as the correlate of freedom; since human beings (and angels) are free, they can choose, and in some cases have chosen, to act according to principles based on their own will to power (*libido dominandi*).

The will to power, rather than to love, is the desire to act as though we are gods, ends or goods in ourselves rather than solely in relationship to God and God's will to love. This misunderstanding of our own place and the actions arising from it amount both to our own fall and to the set of ways in which we exploit, rather than steward, what God has given.

All forms of moral evil can be understood, directly or indirectly, in these terms.

Oppression and violence among humans reflect our will to power, and our failure to discern, accept and live into our intended place of immense dignity and responsibility relative to one another.

It is also not hard to see how environmental degradation is a result of this 'will to power' on the part of humanity. God's intention is that human beings exercise reasoned and loving power in creation, not on behalf of themselves but as part of this order of love, which is God's. A sustainable beauty is therefore God's plan.

To Use and to Enjoy

Although recent ecotheologies have criticized the way classical theology gives humanity a unique place and destiny within creation, the reading suggested here actually requires a sort of anthropocentrism, but of a very specific kind. The historical reality of human existence reflects the distorted attempt that human beings have made to dominate one another and the earth, but Judeo-Christian tradition inescapably bestows on humans a pre-eminence which is intended to reflect and foster the order of love which is God's will.

The ethical challenge for humankind does include recognition of our affinity with the earth (Gen 2:7), but also a unique calling (Gen 2:15) among its creatures. It is not the intended pre-eminence of humankind as a self-transcendent, creative and intelligent being which is the source of the earth's woes, but the will to power which involves

rejection of the divinely-intended role for another—at once a more vaunted but less responsible one.

Given the objectification and exploitation that characterizes much human behaviour towards the natural world, ecotheology is justified in seeking to re-emphasize the theme of affinity between humans and other creatures that has a genuine and important place in Christian thought and practice; the shared ‘creatureliness’ relative to a transcendent God is, as we have seen, essential to Augustine’s classical Christian position also.

However the rejection even of a relative or modified anthropocentrism such as that suggested above is problematic, if it entails a call for practice based solely on human participation in, or even identity with, the natural order.⁷ Not only is this avoidance of the distinctive calling of humankind too far removed from biblical witness to be useful for Christian ethics, it also involves a collapse of subject and object whose implications for any sort of ethics are unhelpful. Just as the ethics of gender and of race require the negotiation of affinity and difference, rather than romanticized over-identification with the ‘other’, so too environmental ethics requires acceptance of the uniqueness of humanity as well as affirmation of our affinity with other creatures, and the particular relation of grace and power required of human beings living on earth.

How then are we to live, and how relate to the rest of creation? Augustine famously distinguishes between two classes of things in the world, from a human perspective:

those which one should enjoy (*frui*) and those which one should use (*uti*).⁸ This distinction has an earlier history in Stoic ethics, but its treatment in Augustine has been influential for many thinkers since.

To 'enjoy' something means to value and experience it for its own sake, without qualification. To 'use' something however is to ascribe relative value, and to view it in relation to a wider reality, and in particular to what can be enjoyed:

For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires, if it is a proper object of desire; for an unlawful use ought rather to be called an abuse (*On Christian Doctrine* 4.4)

Only God can really be the object of our 'enjoyment', Augustine often seems to say. Other things are available for (proper) 'use'.

If Augustine's distinction between these two ways of relating meant to set up other objects or elements of creation merely as instrumental for humans, this would be deeply problematic, but a wider view of Augustine's understanding of the cosmos suggests this would be a misreading.

Rather Augustine understands all persons and things in relation to that greater whole we have noted, the 'order of love'. Only proper use, use for the right end, constitutes 'use' in this sense rather than abuse. That proper use is not merely conformity to rules, but the celebratory engagement with the other that arises from shared participation in the *ordo amoris*. The things thus used are neither inconsequential and hence to be

exploited, nor ultimate ends and therefore to be worshipped, but must be approached in relation to their and our highest end, who is of course also their and our source, God.

It is not hard however to see how this language could be stretched to mean something structurally parallel, but fundamentally different; i.e., to mean that some things have inherent worth and should be treated with dignity, and others need only be treated to suit other ends. Critics may argue that Augustine leaves this door open; that question lies beyond the scope of this essay.

The difficulty this language presents—for instance, the pejorative connotations of ‘using’ people and things—may be insuperable for us in some contexts, but this in itself reflects starkly on how degraded our sense of human activity has itself become. Although we know that it is wrong to ‘use’ people in the sense that has become common, the environmental crisis challenges us about whether we can use *anything* properly in such a sense, i.e., without regard to its place in a greater order and without circumspection about the consequences. Such wrong ‘use’ is of course what Augustine refers to as the will to power and its consequences, and ‘use’ is exactly the responsible engagement that acknowledges the complex, fragile and beautiful order of the world.

Use and enjoyment are therefore ways of acting within the God-world relationship. Human life demands both a careful and reverent approach to all things, viewing and relating to them with regard to the present and to the intended beauty of creation, and also with recognition that neither they nor we are ends in ourselves.

Conclusion

Augustine's thought suggests ways to consider human action within the world in full acknowledgement of our creaturely status and unique calling.

The diversity of creation is an order of love, within which humans have a unique status that derives from creativity, intelligence and self-transcendence. These qualities are spoken of scripturally as our being made in the image of God. To share this image does not mean to receive a licence for exploitation; it means to share in the love God has for the world, manifested in God's gratuitous act of creation.

Human failure in our dealings with one another and with creation, and with God, are all comprehensible as the free choice made to misconstrue the relationships between things; this choice, the will to power, involves the confusion or substitution of what is to be used with what is to be enjoyed. In making ourselves gods over creation, we abuse God, ourselves, and the world whose care is our vocation. If we make created things our gods, paradoxically we pursue wealth in such a way that abuses creation, rather than serving or sustaining it.

The call to rediscover our being in and from God thus also includes the rediscovery of responsibility to nurture God's creation, in keeping with the order of love.

Questions for discussion:

1. Do 'dualistic' notions that radically distinguish God and the world always hinder positive reflection on ecology?
2. Does the idea of a divine 'order of beauty' help us consider the essential differences, needs and responsibilities of different creatures?
3. Can we 'use' things faithfully and well? Has this language of use and enjoyment any use to us?

¹ Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

² See the examples cited in Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The Metaphysics of Environmental Concern - A Critique of Ecotheological Antidualism', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 6 (1993): 67-78.

³ An interesting exception is found in the discussion of Augustine in H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Santmire, acknowledging different strands in Augustine that are more and less helpful, argues that Augustine's move from a logic of ascent to a more historical sense of life as pilgrimage provides a viable theology of nature.

⁴ See also Madonna Adams, 'Augustine and Love of the Environment', in *Thinking About the Environment: Our Debt to the Classical and Medieval Past* (ed. T. M. Robinson and Laura Westra; Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), 73-84.

⁵ In her important and influential book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Sallie McFague treats Augustine subtly and thoughtfully (see pp. 74, 115, 183-4) but ultimately concludes that he (and the rest of the great sacramental and mystical theologians of Christian tradition) are problematic in seeing the world as a mere 'expression' of divine beauty (184). I think this is to misconstrue that tradition, as though its exponents saw the God of beauty as a mere (but better) object among other objects.

⁶ For example, *City of God* 15.22. On the *ordo amoris* see Gerald Schlabach et al., 'Ethics', in Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini, eds., *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 320-330. The implications of Augustine's aesthetics of creation are discussed helpfully, with particular reference to *On the Trinity*, in Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (Radical orthodoxy series; London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 27-71.

⁷ Szerszynski, 69-71.

⁸ The key discussions include *On Christian Doctrine* 1 and *On Various Questions* 30.