Chapter 3
Natural Law and the Natural Environment

Michael Baur

Pope Benedict XVI's Vision beyond Utilitarianism and Deontology

In his 2009 encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI (2009b, #53), citing an encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI (1967, #85), observes that "the world is in trouble because of the lack of thinking." To be sure, the world is in trouble for reasons unconnected to the lack of thinking; but, even while that is true, the lack of thinking does partly account for why the world is in trouble. As Benedict XVI (2009b, #53) goes on to say:

> [A] new trajectory of thinking is needed in order to arrive at a better understanding of the implications of our being one family; interaction among peoples of the world calls us to embark upon this new trajectory, so that integration can signify solidarity rather than marginalization. Thinking of this kind requires a *deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation*. This is a task that cannot be undertaken by the social sciences alone, insofar as the contribution of disciplines such as metaphysics and theology is needed if man's transcendent dignity is to be properly understood.

For Benedict XVI, a deeper, theological and metaphysical evaluation of the category of "relation" is necessary if we are to achieve a proper understanding of the human being's "transcendent dignity." For some contemporary thinkers, this position might seem to be hopelessly paradoxical or even incoherent. After all, many contemporary thinkers are apt to believe that the human creature can have "transcendent dignity" only if the being and goodness of the human creature is not conditioned by or dependent upon any relation or relatedness to anything else, including the natural environment.

As this chapter seeks to show, the apparent paradox in Benedict XVI's statement will begin to disappear if one resists the rather understandable temptation to interpret his thought by relying on presuppositions borrowed from contemporary ethical theories. More specifically, this chapter aims to show that Benedict XVI's teachings—embedded as they are within a rich tradition of Catholic "natural law" thinking—are importantly distinguishable from contemporary utilitarian and deontological views. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that Benedict XVI's "natural law" account offers an intellectually defensible alternative to contemporary modes of environmental thinking.

As part of his "natural law" account, Benedict XVI endorses three important yet easily-overlooked metaphysical premises. These three premises have to do with: a) the convertibility of being and goodness; b) the convertibility of being and order; and

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c) the uniquely intellectual nature of the human being. According to the first premise, every instance of being—precisely insofar as it is an instance of being—is also an instance of goodness (thus wherever there is being, there is also goodness). According to the second premise, every instance of intelligible order—precisely insofar as it is an instance of intelligible order—is also an instance of being (thus wherever there is intelligible order, there is also being and therefore also goodness). According to the third premise, the human being—by virtue of her/his unique intellectual nature—is uniquely capable of reflecting (through acts of understanding) the immanent orderliness and goodness that belongs to any being within the natural world. When one understands what is implied by these three premises built into Benedict XVI's "natural law" account, it becomes possible to appreciate how his account offers a vision that captures some of the fundamental insights of contemporary environmental thinking without falling prey to some of its problems and shortcomings.

BEING, GOODNESS, AND ORDER

Many contemporary thinkers working in the area of environmental ethics will readily agree that human beings have a moral obligation to care for the (non-human) natural environment. There is a great deal of disagreement, however, regarding just *why* human beings have such a moral obligation. Furthermore, modern arguments offered for why human beings ought to care for the natural environment have not been altogether satisfactory. For example, contemporary utilitarian thinkers such as Peter Singer (1979) have argued that there is a moral obligation to care for the environment since such care will promote "the greatest happiness for the greatest number"; that is, such care will in the long run increase the overall amount of pleasure and decrease the overall amount of pain for beings that are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain. A key problem with the utilitarian, sentience-based position in favor of care for the environment is that this position offers no basis for caring about non-sentient living beings (e.g., plants) or non-living beings (e.g., stalactites and stalagmites) if care for such beings cannot be linked in some way to the pleasures and pains that might be experienced by sentient beings. If the annihilation of some non-sentient natural form (e.g., some crystal formation on a remote part of earth) does not decrease the net amount of happiness or pleasure to be experienced by sentient beings, then—on the utilitarian account—there is no moral reason for humans to refrain from annihilating the non-sentient natural form.

Some contemporary deontological thinkers have sought to overcome the limitations of sentience-based, utilitarian arguments by arguing that non-sentient beings, including even non-living beings, are capable of possessing "intrinsic worth" or "inherent worth." According to these deontological accounts, it is the "intrinsic worth" of all beings (including even non-living beings) that grounds the human obligation to care for the natural environment, even when such care will not in any way enhance the pleasures or diminish the pains that might be experienced by sentient beings

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(Brennan 1988). A key problem with the deontological position regarding care for the environment is that it fails to account for how some beings—even beings that are said to possess "intrinsic worth"—might be used (or even used up) for the purposes of satisfying legitimate human ends.

Against the backdrop of contemporary utilitarian and deontological theories, Benedict XVI (2007c, 338) holds that it is important to achieve conceptual clarity and rigor regarding our metaphysical commitments. If we fail to ask and answer deeper metaphysical questions, we are apt to misunderstand our own nature as human beings, and as a result also misunderstand the norms that ought to govern our relationship to the rest of the created order. The metaphysical questions that need to be asked and answered should concern us, not only in connection with "abstract philosophical considerations," but also for the sake of addressing "the concrete situation of our society." Unfortunately, according to Benedict (2009b, #31), modern intellectual endeavors tend to be characterized by a kind of fragmentation that has had deleterious consequences for moral thought and action. This fragmentation has made it difficult in our contemporary context for "faith, theology, metaphysics, and science" to "come together in a collaborative effort in the service of humanity." For Benedict XVI, one should not lose sight of the fact that metaphysical superficiality and theoretical fragmentation can have deeply problematic practical as well as theoretical consequences:

> The excessive segmentation of knowledge, the rejection of metaphysics by the human sciences, the difficulties encountered by dialogue between science and theology are damaging not only to the development of knowledge, but also to the development of peoples, because these things make it harder to see the integral good of man in its various dimensions.

The "broadening [of] our concept of reason and its application" is indispensable if we are to succeed in adequately weighing all the elements involved in the question of development and in the solution of socio-economic problems.

In light of contemporary challenges, Benedict XVI offers what promises to be an intellectually defensible and practically viable way of thinking about the natural environment and about human obligations with respect to that environment. Benedict's theorizing about human morality and about the natural environment is indebted in large measure to his understanding and appropriation of classical thinkers—including especially St. Augustine (354-430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)—within the Church's "natural law" tradition. Benedict XVI (2008, #13) holds that, in spite of the fragmentation and confusion which frequently characterize modern metaphysical and moral thought, it is possible to achieve a reasonable degree of conceptual clarity and consensus. We can achieve such clarity and consensus, he argues, if we turn to "natural law" which can serve as a "common moral law" in the midst of contemporary dissonance and disagreement. According to Benedict, human beings are

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> capable of discovering, at least in its essential lines, *this common moral law* which, over and above cultural differences, enables human beings to come to a common understanding regarding the most important aspects of good and evil, justice and injustice. It is essential to go back to this fundamental law, committing our finest intellectual energies to this quest, and not letting ourselves be discouraged by mistakes and misunderstandings. Values grounded in the natural law are indeed present, albeit in a fragmentary and not always consistent way, in international accords, in universally recognized forms of authority, in the principles of humanitarian law incorporated in the legislation of individual States or the statutes of international bodies.

The "natural law" tradition to which Benedict XVI explicitly appeals is exceedingly rich, and thus resists any simplistic, superficial characterization. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify at least three central theoretical commitments that belong to this tradition and which will prove to be especially illuminating as we seek to appreciate his thought regarding human beings and their relation to the natural environment.

First of all, Benedict XVI affirms what has come to be known in philosophical and theological circles as the "convertibility" of being and goodness. To say that being and goodness are "convertible" is to say that every instance of being, precisely insofar as it is an instance of being, is also an instance of goodness; and every instance of goodness, precisely insofar as it is an instance of goodness, is also an instance of being. Even though the meaning of the term "being" may not be the same as the meaning of the term "goodness," it nevertheless remains the case that any proper referent of the term "being" is also always a proper referent of the term "goodness." Thus while "being" and "goodness" differ in meaning, they do not differ in reference. It follows from this that every being, even if the being is non-living and non-sentient, is good in some respect, and thus has some degree of value or worth that is not dependent on its instrumental value or worth for some other being.

Benedict XVI has expressed an especially deep and long-lasting affinity and appreciation for the thought of St. Augustine; indeed, Benedict (as Joseph Ratzinger) wrote his doctoral thesis on Augustine (Ratzinger 1954). And thus perhaps fittingly, it was St. Augustine who most famously expressed the traditional Catholic teaching regarding the convertibility of being and goodness. If being and goodness are convertible, argues St. Augustine, then we must conclude that all beings—no matter how seemingly base or ignoble—are good. Furthermore, since every being—insofar as it is a being—is good, it also follows for Augustine (1961, 4.12; also for Benedict XVI) that what we call "evil" is not any kind of being in its own right, but is rather a defect or privation in some existing being:

> All of nature, therefore, is good, since the Creator of all nature is supremely good. But nature is not supremely and immutably good as is the Creator of it. Thus the good in created things can be diminished and augmented. For good to be diminished is evil; still, however much it is diminished, something must remain

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> of its original nature as long as it exists at all. For no matter what kind or however insignificant a thing may be, the good which is its "nature" cannot be destroyed without the thing itself being destroyed. There is good reason, therefore, to praise an uncorrupted thing, and if it were indeed an incorruptible thing which could not be destroyed, it would doubtless be all the more worthy of praise. When, however, a thing is corrupted, its corruption is an evil because it is, by just so much, a privation of the good. Where there is no privation of the good, there is no evil. Where there is evil, there is a corresponding diminution of the good. As long, then, as a thing is being corrupted, there is good in it of which it is being deprived . . . . If, however, the corruption comes to be total and entire, there is no good left either, because it is no longer an entity at all. Wherefore corruption cannot consume the good without also consuming the thing itself . . . . Whenever a thing is consumed by corruption, not even the corruption remains, for it is nothing in itself, having no subsistent being in which to exist.

By virtue of his affirmation of the traditional Catholic teaching regarding the convertibility of being and goodness, Benedict XVI can hold that every being—no matter how lowly—is good in itself. This allows Benedict XVI to accept one of the key teachings of deontological environmental ethics, namely that there is "intrinsic worth" or "inherent worth" in every part of nature, and not just in those parts of nature which belong to or serve the interests of sentient and/or living beings. But there are still further implications to Benedict XVI's rich and metaphysically-informed environmental vision. Benedict XVI also accepts—secondly—what might be called the convertibility of being and order. To say that being and order are "convertible" is to say that every instance of being, precisely insofar as it is an instance of being, is also an instance of order; and every instance of order, precisely insofar as it is an instance of order, is also an instance of being. Because every instance of being is also an instance of goodness, it follows (according to the metaphysical view endorsed by Benedict XVI) that every instance of order is also an instance of goodness. If there were no order whatsoever, then there would also be no goodness and thus no being. Once again, it is St. Augustine who most famously elucidated this traditional Catholic view regarding the convertibility of being and order, and also the convertibility of order and goodness.

Augustine readily acknowledges that some instances of order may be better or worse than others; but an instance of order is said to be bad, not just insofar as it is an instance of order, but rather insofar as it is an instance of order that is lacking a higher or more fitting kind of order that ought to exist but does not. What might be fitting, orderly, and thus good in one context (i.e., within the context of one ordering) can turn out to be unfitting, disorderly, and thus bad in some other context (i.e., within the context of some other ordering). As Augustine (1953, ch. 23) explains:

> [A] form is called bad either in comparison with something more handsome or more beautiful, this form being less, that greater, not in size but in comeliness; or because it is out of harmony with the thing to which it is applied, so that it seems

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> alien and unsuitable. It is as if a man should walk forth into a public place naked, which nakedness does not offend if seen in a bath. Likewise also order is called bad when order itself is maintained in an inferior degree. Hence not order, but rather disorder, is bad; since either the ordering is less than it should be, or not as it should be. Yet where there is any measure, any form, any order, there is some good and some nature; but where there is no measure, no form, no order, there is no good, no nature.

The crucial point here is that it is only through some kind of order (or form) that any natural kind and thus any natural thing can exist in the first place; and correspondingly, it is only through some kind of order (or form) that any natural goodness can exist. If all order or form were taken away, then all being and thus all goodness would also disappear.

ORDER, LAW, AND NATURAL LAW

Like Augustine before him, Thomas Aquinas accepted a metaphysically informed account of the convertibility of being and goodness, as well as the convertibility of being and order. Despite this agreement, Aquinas went beyond Augustine in order to develop a systematic account of law and natural law, which was to exercise a deep and abiding influence on subsequent Catholic thought, including the thought of Benedict XVI.

Following Augustine, Aquinas observes that when one apprehends the ordering among parts in a thing, one also apprehends that which gives being and goodness to the thing. For Aquinas, the intelligible ordering of parts (or form) within a thing gives being to the thing; but this very same ordering (or form) also gives goodness to the thing. After all, says Aquinas (1981, 2|2.109.2), "good consists in order," and evil consists in a lack of due order (1|2.75.1.1). For Aquinas, then, wherever there is intelligible order of a certain kind, there is also being and goodness of a certain kind. The being and goodness about which we are speaking can be the goodness of some individual substance such as a plant or animal; or else it can be the being and goodness of some "composition" such as a team, an army, a political community, or even the entire created universe (1|2.17.4).

A crucial implication of the Augustinian-Thomistic view regarding the convertibility of being and order is the view that order is not something super-added to being; it is not the case that beings first exist apart from all order, and then (subsequently and externally) have order imposed upon them. On the contrary, a being can be a being in the first place only if there is some kind of order or ordering that makes it what it is. Stated more fully: a being could not exist and act as the particular kind of being that it is, if there were no (internal) ordering among its parts, and if there were no (external) ordering or context within which the being acted and expressed its true nature. The crucial claim here is that order is not something that has to be imposed upon beings violently or in a manner that contravenes their nature; quite on the contrary, order is

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nothing other than the patterning or proportionality which enables beings to exist and to act as the kinds of beings that they are in the first place.

For Augustine as well as for Aquinas, law or lawfulness is nothing other than a particular kind of order or ordering. It is a kind of order or ordering in accordance with which one being is said to belong to a community and contribute to the good of that community, even as it contributes to its own good. Thus for Augustine and Aquinas (and as we shall see, for Benedict XVI), a being's placement within a larger whole or within a larger community is not something that is imposed upon the being externally or violently; instead, a creature's placement within a larger whole or community (including the larger whole or community which is the entire created order) is the condition under which the creature becomes most fully and most properly the kind of being that it is in the first place.

This Augustinian-Thomistic understanding of order and lawfulness will strike many contemporary readers as rather counter-intuitive. This is because many contemporary readers, influenced by modern positivistic accounts of law such as that articulated by John Austin (1998), have grown accustomed to thinking of law as nothing other than an externally-imposed command or set of commands backed by threats or force. Against all such positivist accounts, Augustine and Aquinas offer a "natural law" account according to which the law as such guides individual beings to the common good of a larger whole or community, but not by means of externally-imposed orders or commands; it does so rather by means of principles whose operative force is *internal* to those individual beings that are subject to the law.

Along these lines, Aquinas (1981, 1|2.93.5) argues that human beings cannot "legislate" or "make law" for non-rational creatures. Even though human beings may exercise a great deal of control over non-rational creatures, humans are—strictly speaking —unable to make law for non-rational creatures. When human beings exercise control over non-rational creatures, they do not (and cannot) lay down or legislate any principles that might become principles belonging "internally" or "naturally" to those non-rational creatures themselves. Thus, for example, when a farmer plows a field by controlling the actions of oxen, the actions taking place are not the actions of the oxen, but always only the actions of the farmer himself. The farmer merely uses the oxen as a means or as an instrument to accomplish what remains always only the farmer's own end and never becomes the end of the oxen themselves (cf. Baur 2012). When the farmer exercises control over the oxen, he does not make law for the oxen; for to make law for the oxen would be to prescribe a principle of action or motion which would belong to the oxen as an internal or "natural" principle of the oxen's own actions and motions. By contrast, some human beings can make law for other human beings, since some human beings can prescribe principles of action that—precisely because they are understood and adopted by these other human beings—can become the internal or internalized principles of those other human beings' own actions. It is possible, of course, for some positive laws to be externally and violently imposed on the human beings who are made subject to such laws. But the more it is the case that positive law is imposed externally or violently on

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humans, the more it is the case that such law lacks the character of lawfulness and instead takes on the character of tyranny. It is for this reason that Aquinas (1981, 1|2.96.4), following Augustine (1964, 1.5), says that "unjust law is no law at all." For an "unjust law" is one that is lacking in some due order or proportionality. To the extent that an existing law lacks some due order or proportionality, it is less capable of becoming reasonably adopted as the internal or internalized principle of the actions of those human beings who are subject to it. But if an existing law is not adopted and internalized by those who are subject to it, then it must in some measure be imposed externally and violently—and thus it has the character of tyranny rather than lawfulness.

Some important implications can be developed from the Augustinian-Thomistic view that law or lawfulness, properly speaking, operates as a principle which is internal to those individual beings which are subject to the law. First of all, individual beings that are subject to law are not made to act in accordance with the law because of some external or violent force that must be imposed on them. Instead, they are made to act in accordance with the law (and thus to act for the sake of the common good served by the law) on the basis of principles that are internal to their own being as individuals. This is why Aquinas (1981, 1|2.91.6) argues that sensuous inclinations and instincts in animals have the character of law or lawfulness. By acting on the basis of their own sensuous inclinations (for example, by copulating, and producing and caring for their own offspring), individual animals act in a way that is natural to them; they act in a way that accords with their very own desires and inclinations. And yet, by acting in accordance with their own inner strivings and inclinations, they also act so as to benefit the entire natural community (the species) to which they belong. The law or lawfulness that guides individual animals to act for the sake of the common good of the species does not operate by means of an externally or violently imposed force, but by means of the inmost, natural strivings of the individual animals themselves. For Augustine and Aquinas, as well as for Benedict XVI, God's all-comprehensive governance of the created universe is the most perfect example of such law or lawfulness. By virtue of God's eternal law, God leads all things to act for the sake of the common good of the universe. God does this not by any transitive or external action upon creatures, but rather by the intransitive, creative action that gives creatures their being in the first place, and thus also gives them their inmost natural desires and inclinations. In accordance with this view of law, Aquinas (1976, 3.122) argues that God, as creator, can never act upon creatures externally or violently; and furthermore that it is not possible for us humans to offend God except by acting contrary to our very own good.

Benedict XVI (2007a, #3) further develops some of the implications of this Augustinian-Thomistic account of law. He argues, for example, that the God-given "norms of the natural law should not be viewed as externally imposed decrees, as restraints upon human freedom"; instead, they should be welcomed as an invitation to satisfy the deepest desires that belong to us in accordance with a divine plan "inscribed" in our very nature. In a similar vein, he observes that the "natural moral

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norm" for human action does not have to be derived from any external or alien authority; it is discoverable by humans through the "inner logic of the deepest inclinations present in their being" (2008, #13). Furthermore, he argues that it is a mistake to regard our dependence on God and on the eternal law as a kind of "imposition from without" (2007b, 264-267); after all, we have our very being and desires only through God's providential governance of the created order within which we exist.

For Benedict XVI, these important implications of the Augustinian-Thomistic account of law are directly connected to a key lesson from Trinitarian theology. According to this theology, every created being, each in its own way, imitates the super-abundant, self-communicative activity of the triune God. Because God is love, "He does not live in splendid solitude," but is essentially self-giving, self-communicating, and relational. We can perceive this basic truth, says Benedict XVI (2009c),

> by observing both the macro-universe: our earth, the planets, the stars, the galaxies; and the micro-universe: cells, atoms, elementary particles. The "name" of the Blessed Trinity is, in a certain sense, imprinted upon all things because all that exists, down to the last particle, is in relation; in this way we catch a glimpse of God as relationship . . . .

In another context, Benedict XVI (2007b, 265) observes that human beings possess their very being and essence only by virtue of relationships with other beings and thus only within a larger, ordered whole: "Human beings are relational, and they possess their lives—themselves—only by way of relationship."

THE HUMAN BEING'S UNIQUE DIGNITY AND INTELLECTUAL NATURE

We saw earlier how Benedict XVI endorses the traditional Catholic view that being and goodness are convertible. Because of this, he is able to hold—as many deontological environmental thinkers hold—that every being can be said to have "intrinsic worth" or "inherent worth." But now we have also seen that Benedict holds that every being, including even the human being, can have its being and goodness only through relationships to other beings in a larger, ordered whole. Benedict's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings, and on the human being's necessary dependence on relationality, might seem to make him an ally of certain utilitarian environmental thinkers who tend to downplay the human being's unique status within the natural order. But it would be premature to draw any such sweeping conclusion. For Benedict XVI (2009a), it is true that humans can express their being and their goodness only within the context of a larger natural order; however, it is quite erroneous "to identify the person exclusively in terms of genetic information and interactions with the environment." Quoting approvingly from #347 of Pascal's *Pensées*, Benedict observes that the human being plays a distinctive role within the

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natural order because of the human being's unique intellectual nature:

> It must be stressed that man will always be greater than all the elements that form his body; indeed, he carries within him the power of thought which always aspires to the truth about himself and about the world. The words of Blaise Pascal, a great thinker who was also a gifted scientist charged with significance, spring to mind: "Man is only a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and he knows the advantage that the universe has over him; the universe, instead, knows nothing."

While every created being is an instance of goodness and thus imitates God in some way, according to Benedict XVI, the human being is a unique instance of goodness, and thus imitates God in a unique way. This is because the human being is able to obtain intellectual knowledge (knowledge of the intelligible relatedness or togetherness) of things in the created order. Now the human being's act of intellectual knowing is an act that unifies things, or draws them together, in the mind of the knower. For Benedict XVI, the created order exists ultimately for the sake of being drawn together by God and to God. When the human being engages in acts of intellectual knowing, it apprehends things in their intelligible relatedness or togetherness, and thus cognitively *imitates* the act of divine drawing-together. One can say, then, that the realm of things that can be known by humans is ordered towards—and is in a way perfected through—acts of human knowing. While for Benedict the created order achieves its ultimate and complete perfection only in its being drawn together by God and to God, it achieves a partial perfection in its being drawn together (cognitively) in the mind of the human knower.

The basic point can be stated somewhat differently: the human being for Benedict XVI is a unique part within the whole of creation, since the human being's own perfection as a part within the created order (i.e., the human being's perfection in the act of knowing) is at the same time a partial perfection of the whole created order itself. While every created being possesses goodness or "intrinsic worth," the goodness or intrinsic worth of the human being is capable of including or comprehending the goodness or intrinsic worth of other created beings. Such inclusiveness or comprehensiveness is possible because human beings can engage in acts of intellectual knowing that cognitively draw together or unify the things that are known; such acts of human knowing imitate the all-inclusive, all-comprehensive act of God's knowing, which is the same as the act of God's being, which—in turn—is the final cause and final end of the entire created order. It is for this reason that the human being, while part of a larger created order, is also a being towards which other created beings might be ordered; and so the human being may make use of other created beings for the sake of satisfying legitimate human ends. Benedict XVI

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touches upon this important point frequently, when he reminds us (in a wide variety of contexts) that the human being is created in the image and likeness of God. The same point is developed by Aquinas, who argues that the perfection of the universe as a whole required the creation of finite intellectual beings such as human beings (Aquinas 1976, 2.45-46). Because the human creature—unlike lower creatures—is able to reflect the natural world's unity and goodness in a uniquely excellent way, we can say that "our duties toward the environment flow from our duties towards the person" (Benedict XVI 2010, #12).

It might appear that there is something problematically anthropocentric in the view that human duties to the environment are grounded in—or "flow from"—human duties to other human persons. The appearance of such anthropocentrism begins to dissolve, however, when one begins to recognize the fuller implications of Pope Benedict's "relational" account of human beings and other created beings. Human duties to the environment "flow from" human duties to other human persons, not because created beings in the environment have value only in their usefulness to humans, but rather because created beings in the environment can become truly themselves (can become truly perfected in their own being) "only by way of relationship."

Created beings in the environment can thus become truly perfected in their being, not insofar as they are *used*, but rather insofar as they are *understood and known*. When they are understood and known, created beings in the environment are cognitively drawn together and brought into relationship with other beings. Such drawing-together happens partially and imperfectly through acts of human knowing and loving; it happens fully and perfectly in the act of God's knowing and loving. Benedict XVI (2007b, 265) goes so far as to say that sin can be understood as the "rejection of relationality." Thus when human beings act as if created beings in the environment have value only in their usefulness to humans—i.e., when they act as if created beings in the environment have no inherent value or goodness of their own—they are acting as if human relationality can be subordinated or even denied in favor of human autonomy and self-assertion; and thus they are acting sinfully. Importantly, the view that sin consists in the "rejection of relationality" is fully compatible with the view that human beings nevertheless possess a "distinctiveness and superior role" within the created order (Benedict XVI 2010, #13).

The relational, "natural law" environmental vision offered by Benedict XVI also promises to clear up certain confusions in our contemporary thought and practices involving "rights," "duties," and "environmental justice." According to his relational, "natural law" account (which has its origins in the thought of Augustine and Aquinas), it makes sense to speak about "rights" and "duties" only where it makes sense to talk about "justice" or a "just ordering." Since justice consists in treating equals equally, and injustice consists in treating equals unequally (or unequals equally), it makes sense to talk about "justice" (and thus to talk about "rights") only where two or more individual beings can be said to be "equal" or "unequal" to one another in some relevant respect. In other words, it makes sense to talk about "justice" (and thus to

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talk about “rights”) only where two or more individual beings stand in some kind of *relation* to one another.

Our contemporary discourses and practices involving “justice” and “rights” necessarily presuppose a kind of relationality, even though such relationality is often overlooked (or even denied outright). A key lesson to be drawn from Benedict’s “relational” metaphysics is the lesson that “justice” and “rights” are necessarily relational, even though human rights are inviolable: while “rights” depend on “justice” and are thus relational, it remains the case that every act of injustice against a human being as such (i.e., every violation of a human right) is always wrong or intrinsically evil (thus human rights as such are inviolable). Contrary to many contemporary perspectives, then, Benedict (2007c, 345) teaches that it is possible to affirm the *inviolability* of human rights, yet without affirming that human autonomy is *absolute* or *non-relational*. There is no doubt that human freedom is a genuine good, but it can be the genuine good that it is, only within the context of an ordered “network of other goods.” Accordingly, the “criterion of real right—right entitled to call itself true right, which accords with freedom—can, therefore, only be the good of the whole . . .” (Benedict 2007c, 349).

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Benedict XVI’s “natural law” environmental vision includes his endorsement of three metaphysical premises involving: a) the convertibility of being and goodness; b) the convertibility of being and order; and c) the uniquely intellectual nature of the human being. It is because of these three theoretical commitments that Benedict XVI can offer an environmental vision that is at once continuous with, and yet distinct from, certain contemporary accounts. In partial agreement with the contemporary deontological accounts, Benedict can assert that every individual being possesses “intrinsic worth” or “inherent worth.” In partial agreement with the contemporary utilitarian account, Benedict can also assert that every individual being is also a part within some larger ordered whole. But going beyond both the deontological account and the utilitarian account, Benedict’s “natural law” vision allows him to assert that the human being—by virtue of her/his unique intellectual nature—is able to apprehend the immanent orderliness and goodness of any aspect of the natural world, and thus is more capable than any other terrestrial being of reflecting God’s wisdom and goodness. Since the perfection of the created universe requires the manifestation or reflection of God’s wisdom and goodness, it follows for Benedict that the perfection of the created universe is made possible uniquely through the intelligent activity of human beings. It is for this reason that Benedict (unlike many contemporary thinkers) can assert that the human being is indeed part of a larger created order, and yet also unique and therefore uniquely justified in making use of other created beings for the sake of satisfying legitimate human ends.

Benedict XVI’s ability to think beyond the limitations of contemporary utilitarianism and deontology also provides the key to appreciating his ability to think

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beyond naturalistic, reductionistic ecocentism (on the one hand) and arrogant, imperialistic anthropocentrism (on the other hand). He gives a clear, succinct summary of his position in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009b, #48), the encyclical which provided the starting point for our reflections in this chapter:

> Nature is at our disposal not as "a heap of scattered refuse," but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order "to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). But it should also be stressed that 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. This having been said, it is also necessary to reject the opposite position, which 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. Today much harm is done to development precisely as a result of these distorted notions.

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