To Whom Much Has Been Given

A Biblical Perspective on the Responsibilities of Human Beings as Environmental Stewards

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Abstract

- God is both immanent and transcendent; he creates, upholds, and providentially guides the universe but is distinct from it. Human beings are an organic fusion of corporeal body and spiritual soul: we are part of physical nature, but not only of physical nature. God, in whose image human beings are made, has delegated to us a unique role as managers of the earth and its other creatures. To deny the special status of human beings in relation to the rest of the earthly creation is also to deny our divinely decreed obligations towards it. At the same time, it is important to remember the fallen state of our race when considering the proper extent of unchecked human authority over nature.

- The idea of rights, upon which so much of contemporary legal and ethical discourse hinges, is inferior in several ways to an ethic founded on responsibilities. Furthermore, of these two possible bases for ethical analysis, only the latter finds direct support in the Bible. An appeal to responsibilities rather than rights is especially helpful in establishing a solid philosophical foundation for environmentalism.

- The land-use and economic laws of the Old Testament include directives for implementing wise environmental practices, and strong sanctions for ignoring them.

- Two different ways of failing at environmental stewardship are much in evidence at present. On the one hand, the steward may lose sight of the distinction between himself and the Master he serves. He may begin to believe that the resources under his control belong not to his Master but to himself, and that he may therefore use (or exploit) them as he pleases. Such a person has a tendency to take God’s creation for granted, and to plunder it through self-centredness. On the other hand, the steward may begin to regard herself simply as a part of the estate she has been called upon to manage, denying any significant difference between herself and the Master’s other creatures, and thereby failing to acknowledge her dominion over them and her responsibility for them. Owing to an excessively egalitarian – or even worshipful – attitude towards the natural world, a person of this sort is in danger of reverting to a kind of pantheistic nature religion.
‘Of one to whom much has been given, much will be required.’

Jesus’ words in Luke 12.48b provide a succinct key to the views put forward in this essay, and to what I regard as a clear mandate for human stewardship of the environment. Mankind enjoys a special place in God’s creation, and with that privileged position come proportionally great responsibilities. The concept of noblesse oblige is not an outworn relic of the past.

The Unique Status of Human Beings

God is infinite spirit – ‘without body, parts, or passions.’¹ He creates the universe ex nihilo but is not himself bound up in it.²

Human beings are God’s psychosomatic creatures, a two-fold hybrid of material body and spiritual soul. Chief Seattle, a nineteenth-century American Indian leader, is reputed to have said, ‘The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.’ Christians can wholeheartedly concur with the first of these assertions, but not the second, for the Bible insists that we – like all creation – belong not to the earth but to God³, and furthermore that we are constituted not only from the dust of the ground but also from God’s breath (or spirit).⁴ Of all the creatures whose origins are treated in the first two chapters of Genesis, human beings are the only ones said to be made ‘in God’s own image’.⁵

According to the biblical creation narrative, human beings enjoy a singular status that confers upon them both great honour and concomitant grave responsibilities. No sooner are Adam and Eve identified as being made in God’s likeness than they are immediately charged with having ‘dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’⁶ They are also directed to ‘till and keep’⁷ the garden of Eden where they have been placed to live. Human dominion is illustrated in Adam’s assigning names to the animals in Genesis 2, and later in Noah’s task of preserving species during the great flood.
A genuinely biblical approach to any philosophical question must of necessity be *theocentric*, but nowadays the fundamental debate in environmental philosophy is typically posed as a choice between *anthropocentrism* on the one hand and *ecocentrism* or *biocentrism* on the other. Some versions of anthropocentrism have rightly been criticized for exploiting nature and for valuing it only to the extent that it is of ‘use’ to humanity. This utilitarian outlook is not the biblical view, however, for God pronounces nature *good* before mankind is even made[^8], and the whole of creation, not just humanity, is capable of glorifying God.[^9]

None the less, if a choice must be made between these alternatives, there are at least two compelling reasons for being anthropocentric rather than ecocentric, as we shall now consider.

1. **The Sanctity of Human Life**

   In Genesis 9.5 – 6 we read, ‘For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; … Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.’ Although the life of animals is also honoured in the prohibition against eating blood (Gen 9.4), there is no commandment *per se* against killing animals. Jesus says explicitly that human beings are of more value than sparrows and sheep (Matthew 10.31, 12.12), contradicting the assertion made by certain ‘deep ecologists’ that all species are inherently equal in importance. The philosopher Paul Taylor, for example, argues that ‘The killing of a wildflower, then, when taken in and of itself, is just as much a wrong, other-things-being-equal, as the killing of a human.’[^10] Such a claim is so utterly at odds with virtually everyone’s common sense (not to mention our legal system) that it hardly merits a serious refutation. Joe Bloggs, if asked why he swatted a fly instead of letting it share his dinner, will answer with an incredulous laugh – not a closely reasoned philosophical defence. Some of the more extreme pronouncements of the radical

[^8]: Genesis 9.5
[^9]: Genesis 9.5
[^10]: Matthew 10.31, 12.12
biocentrists remind me of a parody of the antepenultimate stanza of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* that was made by Professor J. S. Phillimore of Glasgow University:\(^{11}\):

> He prayeth best who loveth best
> All things however small.
> The streptococcus is the test:
> I hate him worst of all.

### 2. The Moral Standing of Human Beings

On earth it is *de facto* the case that human beings are the only reasoning moral agents, unless there are other such species that have so far maintained a remarkably low profile. In the late 1300s Geoffrey Chaucer wrote a great poem about a ‘Parlement of Foules’ who gathered on Saint Valentine’s Day to choose their mates and to discuss the nature of love, but that, alas, was fantasy. When I lived in Kenya, there used to be occasional trouble with elephants despoiling not only farmers’ crops but also the ecology of the game reserves set aside for them and the other wild animals. In such a case no delegation was sent to reason with the elephants (even though they are generally believed to be among the most intelligent of beasts), for it was understood that only human beings can and will respond to rational arguments, and only they might act responsibly to rectify the situation.

### The Fallen State of Humanity

While (non-utilitarian) anthropocentrism is to be preferred over ecocentrism, we must never forget to take into account the failed state of the human race in the spiritual and moral spheres. In Genesis 3 we learn that the initial harmonious relationship between God and human beings was broken as a result of wilful disobedience on the part of our original ancestors. As a consequence of this we are now all born as fallen creatures, spiritually cut off from God and naturally rebellious against him. Jesus Christ makes possible the reconciliation between God and
humanity, but in this life we still suffer the vagaries of a fallen world. Because the first man was the lord of nature, when he fell so did certain aspects of the natural world. The ground suffered a curse because of his sin, and following the evident rapport between man and the animals in Genesis 2.18–20, we find in Genesis 9.2–4 that

The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

Because the image of God in humanity has been defaced by original sin, we dare not simply follow our naïve inclinations when acting as stewards of creation. Doing what comes naturally is no longer good enough, and none of us can be trusted with absolute power even over animals, plants, and land, let alone over our fellow human beings. Environmental laws are now an unfortunate necessity, and it is surprising that Christian conservatives, who ought to understand the corruption of the human heart better than others, are often the most reluctant to accept this, even though mere self-interest alone for themselves and their descendents would seem to make the clearest and most pragmatic of cases for solicitous preservation of the only planet currently available for human habitation.

What’s Wrong with Rights

**Thesis:** The discourse of rights, within which most issues in politics and moral theory (including environmentalism) are debated these days, is both historically ill founded and philosophically flawed. Ethical and political questions are better analysed, instead, in terms of the older discourse of responsibilities (or, perhaps alternatively, virtues). Let me be clear that I am not advocating a better ‘balance’ between rights and responsibilities, but simply that we drop ‘rights talk’ altogether in favour of ‘responsibilities talk’.
(a) **Historical/Social Weaknesses**

(i) Sophisticated, comprehensive ethical theories based on duties (or virtues) predate the concept of rights in the modern sense – that is, ‘subjective’ natural or human rights viewed as an entitlement or a power, versus the old idea of ‘objective’ right – by thousands of years, and they arose independently in many different locations and cultures. For example: the Jewish Law of Moses, *Dharma* in Hinduism, Buddhism’s Eightfold Path, the *Analects* of Confucius, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the ‘natural law’ of the Stoics and the Scholastics, the moral teachings of Christianity, the Muslim *sharia*, most traditional African ethical codes, etc.

Since it proved possible for numerous varied civilizations to function quite well without it for many centuries, does the relatively new notion of ‘rights’ really possess the critical ethical significance that so many people now attribute to it?¹³

(ii) In contrast to the ancient and widespread duty-based moral systems, rights-based ethics, in addition to being rather recent, are also narrowly localized in origin (viz, Western Europe). The fact that powerful Western countries have effectively *imposed* the doctrine of rights on the rest of the world (with increasing rapidity and force since the UN’s ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ in December 1948) might well be viewed as a kind of ‘ethical imperialism’.

(iii) Some research in psychology, such as that presented in Harvard professor Carol Gilligan’s 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, suggests that the natural propensity of most women is to analyse moral questions in terms of responsibilities, activities of care, and relationships with others instead of in terms of rights, but that under the strong contemporary influence of the rights point of view they are often impelled to change their way of thinking. This raises the question whether those who insist on formulating ethical questions in terms of rights are contributing to *sexism* as well as imperialism.
(iv) Concentrating on our mutual responsibilities builds community and strengthens social harmony and cohesion, whereas each person’s focusing on his or her private, individual rights tends to result in unhealthy competitiveness and social fragmentation – as already foreseen by Rousseau in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ (It is interesting to compare the socially corrosive effects of the competitiveness intrinsic to the rights perspective with the somewhat analogous but arguably ‘healthy’ competitiveness inherent in a free-enterprise economic system.)

In contrast to the temptation towards self-indulgence implicit in the rights outlook, an ethic of responsibilities aids greatly in the difficult, but crucial, task of self-mastery, promotes the development of the virtues (e.g., the ‘cardinal virtues’ of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude), and fosters a sense of gratitude for the good things of life that come to us. Cicero claims that ‘Gratitude is not only the greatest virtue, but even the mother of all the rest’, and the theologian Karl Barth asserts that ‘radically and basically, all sin is simply ingratitude.’¹⁵

(b) Philosophical Weaknesses

(i) Rights and responsibilities are often regarded as being nothing more than two sides of the same coin, but I believe their relationship is not as utterly symmetric as many people assume. Maintaining that ‘A has a right to B’ is equivalent to saying that everyone else has a responsibility not to impede A in seeking B – or even, perhaps, to aid A in attaining it.

While every right can be rephrased thus in terms of obligations, it does not appear to work the other way round. For example, I have a responsibility to look out for my own health, but can this coherently be regarded as a right belonging to someone else? Likewise, if I tell a friend that my favourite colour is red when it is actually blue, I have failed in my obligation always to be truthful, but to hold that I have thereby violated some supposed ‘right’ of my friend never to be lied to (concerning even such a trivial matter) seems farfetched in the extreme. Jacques Maritain makes a similar point about the asymmetry between rights and responsibilities – especially with
regard to duties of charity and duties to animals – in Chapter 7 of his 1950 book *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*.

(ii) Environmentalism and the moral imperative to avoid unnecessary animal pain can flow naturally from an ethic of responsibilities, but a rights advocate who wished to be able to hold such views would seem to be compelled, as a preliminary, to demonstrate that animals (and perhaps even plants and inanimate objects) possess rights, questionable as this might be.

(iii) ‘*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem.*’ (‘Occam’s Razor’: cf a (i) above.)

(iv) Historically, rights theory developed out of the theory of natural law\(^6\), but it was not a logically necessary development. That is, natural law can exist without natural rights, but I do not see how the converse can possibly be true. It is strange, then, that many people today believe passionately in rights but are quite sceptical about the existence of natural law – from which the idea of rights first arose, and which alone gives it such philosophical support as it possesses.

Similarly, near the beginning of the US Declaration of Independence the source of rights was said to be our ‘Creator’. Thomas Jefferson’s Enlightenment-era colleagues were happy to invoke the rights doctrine, but many of them were Deists and wanted to efface any vestiges of a personal God from their philosophy. This seems to me rather like insisting on occupying the first floor of a building while at the same time being determined to knock out the ground floor upon which the upper storey rests. As long as a ‘right’ meant what the medieval Scholastics understood by the term – namely, a guarantee of the freedom of action necessary to fulfil one’s duty to God (or, alternatively, to the natural law) – then I think the notion was probably benign. However, once such a duty-based understanding was lost, whether through religious apostasy or bad philosophy, it was almost inevitable that the concept of rights should become perverted and abused, as we have no shortage of evidence for today. In the process we have become like G. K. Chesterton’s madman\(^7\): losing everything except our reason, and thereby forsaking our sanity.
God’s Concern for the Environment

At the point of bringing the children of Israel into Canaan, God prescribes environmental practices to be followed, especially with regard to the use of land. For example:

You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. (Deut 25.4)

When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them; you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field men that they should be besieged by you? (Deuteronomy 20.19)

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your ass may have rest, and the son of your bondmaid, and the alien, may be refreshed. (Exodus 23.10–12)

The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell in it securely. And if you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crops?’, I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, so that it will bring forth fruit for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating old produce; until the ninth year, when the produce comes in, you shall eat the old. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess you shall grant a redemption of the land [i.e., every half-century, in the year of Jubilee, when land that had been sold reverted back to the family it had originally been assigned to]. (Leviticus 25.19–24)

God also decrees some rather harsh penalties if his commandments are flouted:

Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land’; whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. (Deuteronomy 9.4. See also the last part of Revelation 11.18, translated in the New Jerusalem Bible as, ‘The time has come to destroy those who are destroying the earth.’)

Do not defile yourselves … lest the land vomit you out, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (Leviticus 18.24–28)

If in spite of this you will not hearken to me … I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you; and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest which it had not when you dwelt upon it. (Lev 26.27–35)
In 586 B.C. God made good on these threats, as Jerusalem was sacked and the people of Judah were carried off into captivity:

[The king of the Chaldeans] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him … until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years. (2 Chronicles 36.20–21)

**Two Prevalent Errors**

The quotation (page 2) attributed to Chief Seattle helps remind us of two common ways of failing at environmental stewardship:

(a) *Forgetting That the Earth Belongs to God, Not to Us*

It is unfortunate that our civil laws allow land to be sold in such a way that people often come to believe they actually own it. But, as the passage above from Leviticus 25 reminds us, the land is really God’s, and we are but brief sojourners on it. Those who forget this fact can easily lose sight of their role as stewards and begin to think of themselves as masters instead. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that such lapsed stewards vigorously assert their ‘right’ to use and ‘develop’ their land in any way they choose, even if that involves open-cast mining, the clear-felling of forests, or squeezing yet another shopping centre or block of terraced houses into the last available bit of green space. Those who reason like this typically think of themselves as being politically ‘conservative’, but conservation really has little to do with their concerns. Though they may acknowledge God with their lips, they seem to have no conception of how the economic laws of the Old Testament – private property protected, but special treatment of land; forbidding money to be lent at interest; a limit to the sizes of cities – would have inhibited the rise and rampant growth of the huge multinational capitalist system that drives their development schemes, and that also often threatens the liveability of our planet and the welfare of people in poor countries.
(b) Forgetting That We Belong to God, Not to the Earth

If many ‘conservatives’ are prone to greed and delusions of inflated authority, some ‘liberals’ are wont to disregard their dominion altogether and to forget their difference from the rest of nature. To deny one’s special status with respect to nature, however, is effectively to shirk one’s responsibility to manage it wisely. In extreme instances, such people lose track not only of the distinction between the Master’s estate and themselves as stewards, but even the distinction between the estate and the Master. They may say they find their ‘spirituality’ in nature, but they seem not to remember that nature is a fragile, temporary thing – created from nothing – like the tiny hazelnut that Chaucer’s contemporary Julian of Norwich saw in her first mystical vision.¹⁸

Their error is similar to the one St Paul describes in Romans 1.23–25:

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or reptiles. … They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

Nature is not a fit object for our adoration. Utterly indifferent to human concerns, the natural world mocks the devotion of its would-be acolytes, serving up terrifying destruction as often as sublime beauty. The principle of sufficient reason alone should be enough to convince any philosophically minded person that the cosmos cannot represent ultimate reality: it must be dependent upon something – or someone – other than itself.¹⁹ Instead of mankind’s hope being in nature, Scripture asserts the converse, for it is only with the final redemption of elect humanity that ‘creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Romans 8.21). Beautiful as it may be, nature is derivative, contingent, and mortal, and it is no place to put our deepest trust:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burnt up. … But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness
dwells. (2 Peter 3.10–13; see also Isaiah 65.17, Hebrews 1.10–12, Revelation 21.1, Mark 13.31, and 1 Corinthians 15.53)

The current ‘New Age’ version of nature worship is a pathetic regress into pantheism after thousands of laborious years spent rising above it. It would be almost comical if the potential consequences were not so dire.

Still, even pantheism is preferable to an atheistic ‘scientism’ that finds only cold, impersonal mechanism in the universe. To their credit, pantheists and neo-pagans still possess a sense of awe and enchantment, and they have not yet lost the refreshing capacity to believe in something other than themselves. If they can populate every grove of trees with wood nymphs and are able to see a naiad in each brook, then they at least have some incipient foundation for a more mature faith. After all, the Bible itself uses images of nature to describe the divine. For example:

His voice was like the sound of many waters … and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Revelation 1.15–16)

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. (Psalm 92.12)

And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12.3)

‘The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going’ (Jesus, speaking of the activity of the Holy Spirit in John 3.8).

You will do well to pay attention to this … until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter 1.19; compare Rev 2.28 and 22.16)

Given such biblical imagery, we need not feel ashamed of longing, as T. S. Eliot says²⁰, for

The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.
What modern-day pantheists need to understand is that the way to get deeper into the glories of nature is not through nature herself but through her Creator – through the Lord of Nature and the Lord of Glory himself. God has indeed invited us into that deeper beauty, but the entry gate through which we must pass is not the one we might expect. It is not Blake’s grain of sand, not Wordsworth’s daffodils, and not Ansel Adams’s Yosemite. The gate is Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together (John 10.9, Col 1.16 – 17). In finding him – or, rather, being found in him – we shall at last commune directly: not only with nature, but also with nature’s Inventor, Maker, and Redeemer.
Endnotes

1 Number I of the Church of England’s Thirty-nine Articles of Religion; Chapter II of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

2 See, e.g., Gen 1.1; Ps 33.6, 33.9, 148.5; Isa 42.5, 44.24; John 1.3, 4.24; Rom 4.17; Heb 11.3; Rev 4.11; 1 Kings 8.27; Mt 24.35; Acts 17.24–25. (Also 2 Macc 7.28 in the OT Apocrypha.)

3 See, e.g., Leviticus 25.23, Psalm 24.1, Isaiah 43.7, Ephesians 1.12, Colossians 1.16.

4 Genesis 2.7. In both Hebrew and Greek, the concepts of ‘wind’, ‘breath’, and ‘spirit’ are all conveyed by exactly the same word: ruach in Hebrew and πνεῦμα (pneuma) in Greek.

5 Genesis 1.26–27. This is not to claim that human beings are the highest of God’s creatures, nor even the only ones made in his likeness. For example, the Bible also tells of angels, mighty beings of pure spirit, without the material component that we possess. Also, there seems to be nothing to preclude the possibility of God having created rational, non-human, corporeal creatures in his image on other planets of our universe, or in other universes. None of this belies the unique position of dominion and responsibility that human beings have on earth.

6 Genesis 1.28; see also Psalm 8.3–9.

7 Genesis 2.15.

8 Genesis 1.10–25.

9 See, e.g., Psalms 19.1, 150.6; Numbers 14.21; Job 12.7–10, 38.7; Isaiah 35.1–2, 44.23; Luke 2.13–14, 19.37–40.


12 Gen 3.17. See also, e.g., Rom 5.12 ff, Ps 14.1–3, Ps 51.5, Rom 3.9–18, 1 Cor 15.22, Eph 2.

13 The idea of ‘rights’ in the modern sense (particularly from the time of the Enlightenment onwards) has been challenged by more than a few philosophers. For instance, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the founder of Utilitarianism, famously declared that

Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts. (Anarchical Fallacies, Article II)

More recently, Alasdair MacIntyre, in his influential 1981 book After Virtue, contends that

[T]here is no expression in any ancient or medieval language correctly translated by our expression ‘a right’ until near the close of the Middle Ages: the concept lacks any means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, or Arabic, classical or medieval, before about 1400, let alone in Old English, or in Japanese even as late as the mid-nineteenth century. From this it does not of course follow that there are no natural or human rights; it only follows that no one could have known that there were. And this at least raises certain questions. But we do not need to be distracted into answering them, for the truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns. – Chapter 6 (p. 67)
Bearing in mind the time period during which the Bible was written, MacIntyre’s claim that our contemporary understanding of rights simply could not have been expressed naturally in any ancient language ought to be of considerable relevance to Christians, especially as one of the overarching themes of Scripture is grace on the part of God rather than any human deservedness, a theme that does not mesh well with the idea of rights as innate entitlements. It must be admitted that nearly all recent English translations of the Bible do sometimes use ‘a right’ where the Greek text has ἔξουσία – a word that appears at least 100 times in the New Testament, but which more properly has the meaning of ‘authority’ or ‘power’, as it is typically translated in, for example, Matthew 21.23–27 and 28.18, or John 19.10–11. Though the distinction may seem subtle, I believe that present-day translators who employ ‘a right’ for ἔξουσία (in the first half of 1 Corinthians 9, for instance) are guilty of linguistic prochronism: smuggling into such biblical passages – even if inadvertently – a connotation that the original authors could not have intended. By way of comparison, notice how the Authorized Version of the Bible avoids any such tendency in its renderings of 1 Corinthians 9, Romans 9.21, and John 1.12, since to refer to ‘rights’ as most people think of them nowadays would hardly have occurred to any of King James’s translators, even more than 1500 years after New Testament times.


15 Barth, The Doctrine of Reconciliation (Church Dogmatics, Vol. IV, I), Ch. XIII, § 57, 2, p. 41.

16 See, for example, Natural Law and Natural Rights (1980) by John Finnis, especially section VIII.3 (ARE DUTIES ‘PRIOR TO’ RIGHTS?), pages 205–10.

17 Found in Chapter II (‘The Maniac’) of Chesterton’s 1908 book Orthodoxy.

18 From Revelations of Divine Love (or Showings), believed to be the first book ever written in English by a woman:

And in this He showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and I perceived that it was round as any ball. I looked at it and thought: What can this be? And I was given this general answer: It is everything that is made. [italics added] I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothingness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts, and always shall, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; the third is that God preserves it. But what He is who is in truth Maker, Keeper, and Lover I cannot tell, for until I am essentially united with Him I can never have full rest or real happiness; in other words, until I am so joined to Him that there is absolutely nothing between my God and me. We must understand the littleness of all creation and see it for the nothing that it is before we can love and possess God who is uncreated. This is why we have no ease of heart and soul, for we are seeking our rest in trivial things that cannot satisfy … . He is true rest. It is His will that we should know Him, and His pleasure that we should rest in Him. Nothing less will satisfy us.

[Chapter IV of the ‘Short Text’; Chapter 5 of the ‘Long Text’]

19 One (non-Christian) philosopher who makes this argument both lucidly and compellingly is Richard Taylor in his Metaphysics. See the chapter ‘God’ in any of the book’s four editions.