Intellectual Strangers No More?

Peter Singer and Roman Catholicism on Ecological Concern

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Peter Singer's approach to ethics as a utilitarian preference seems to have little to say to Christian ethics. But for a host of important issues, and in particular for those related to ecological ethics, this article argues that this perception is fundamentally mistaken. When comparing Singer's views to a Roman Catholic approach, we find that their disagreement with regard to ecological concern, though significant and important to address, is surprisingly narrow—limited to topics such as intrinsic value and overpopulation. We find broad agreement not only with regard to the seriousness of our ecological problems but more importantly about the radical lifestyle changes that the developed world is morally required to make to adequately address it. The article concludes that, because both approaches have such power in their respective spheres of influence, our ecological crises demand that they work together to change hearts, minds, and lifestyles.

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Introduction

Christian ethics does not appear to have much to say to those who take an approach like that of Peter Singer.[1] The former approach generally associates Singer with the leadership of a "culture of death" that marginalizes the most vulnerable in favor of a crass utilitarian calculation, whereas Singerites have specifically defined themselves against a Roman Catholic sanctity of life ethic. Indeed, Singer claims that we need another "Copernican Revolution," this time in ethics, to fully extricate ourselves from the stranglehold of the church's unjustified focus on members of the species *Homo*

1. Notable exceptions to this trend include the Christian ethicist Eric Gregory (who teaches with Singer at Princeton University), who attempts to charitably engage Singer on our duties to the poor: Eric Gregory, "Agape and Special Relations in a Global Economy: Theological Sources," in Douglas Hicks and Mark Valarie, eds., *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Gerard Maguiness, who wrote a remarkable dissertation while at the Pontifical Lateran University's Institute for Moral Theology that charitably engaged Singer on the issue of assisted suicide: Gerard H. Maguiness, "Assisted Suicide, Self-Love, and a Life Worth Living" (diss., Rome: 2002); the distinguished Protestant Christian ethicist at Yale, John Hare, also engaged Singer charitably in several contexts—including formal debate; Dallas Willard, ed., *A Place for Truth: Leading Thinkers Explore Life's Hardest Questions* (Westmont, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010); and in an attempt to make the engagement more systematic, Christian ethicists Nigel Biggar and John Perry invited Singer and several of his students to engage with Christian ethicists such as Gregory, Hare, and myself at a conference titled *Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer: Utilitarians and Christians in Dialogue* held in May 2011 at Oxford's McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life; http://mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/resources/peter-singer-conference/.

sapiens. But in my broader project on Singer's work, I have tried to show that this polarized understanding of the relationship is a serious mistake. In fact, I argue that if adherents of both approaches would engage the other in the spirit of intellectual solidarity, we would not only find significant common ground but also that our differences are quite narrow.[2]

Indeed, one could actually put Singer and Roman Catholicism in productive conversation on any number of issues: ethical method, duties to the poor, nonhuman animals, euthanasia, and even abortion.[3] But perhaps the most timely and (please forgive the pun) "hot" area to explore is that of ecological ethics. In the recently released third edition of his wildly influential *Practical Ethics*,[4] and despite the fact that he cut much from the 1993 edition, Singer has a renewed focus on such concerns. Singer includes a new chapter on climate change. Roman Catholicism, it turns out, has an intensified focus on these topics as well. John Allen, chief Vatican correspondent for *The National Catholic Reporter*, nicely articulates this in his important book on *The Future Church*:

> Not long ago, the idea of Catholic environmentalism would have struck some as a contradiction in terms. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was fashionable among pioneers of the environmental movement to fault the entire Judeo-Christian tradition for humanity's savage indifference to the earth. . . . [But] in the space of just a quarter-century, the dynamics of the blame game have shifted dramatically. Perhaps under the rubric that the best defense is a good offense, many Church leaders today argue that Christianity is the solution to the ecological crisis, not its source. Christianity fosters a sense of humility and restraint, they argue, essential to curbing humanity's otherwise insatiable appetite for pillaging nature.[5]

But even Allen, who correctly predicts that a focus on ecological issues is one of the major trends that will come to transform the church in the twenty-first century, cannot imagine that the church could engage Singer in a constructive way on these issues[6]:

> At one level, any move to minimize the unique theological status of humanity is a non-starter [for Catholicism]. . . . Anything that smacks, for example, of the argument of Australian ethicist Peter Singer, who treats "speciesism" as a prejudice comparable to racism and classism, will be immediately rejected.[7]

I will here argue that much of what "smacks" of Peter Singer on ecological issues should not be "immediately rejected" and, in fact, should easily be accepted by even traditional Roman Catholics. Indeed, Pope Benedict himself has called for "fraternal collaboration"

2. Charles Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
3. For the overlap on the last issue, see my "Common Ground on Surgical Abortion?—Engaging Peter Singer on the Moral Status of Potential Persons," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 33 (2008): 577–93.
4. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). This book has become a standard text in college ethics courses and has been translated into nearly twenty different languages worldwide.
5. John Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), pp. 299–300.
6. Indeed, the relatively new field of "ecotheology" is simply exploding with energy and insights.
7. Allen, *Future Church*, pp. 323–24.

with nonbelievers, and David Hollenbach claims that our methodology should be one of intellectual solidarity.[8] This is a method that:

> welcomes foreign or strange understandings of the good life in a spirit of hospitality, rather than standing guard against them. This receptive orientation expects to be able to learn something valuable by listening to people who hold understandings of the good life different from one's own. It also expects to be able to teach something valuable to those who are different by speaking to them respectfully about one's own understanding of the human good.[9]

One fantastic example of this method in practice was the May 2011 conference *Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer*.[10] At the conclusion of the conference, Singer himself explicitly claimed that Christians and those who take his approach have much common ground on issues of ecological concern.

In this article, therefore, I intend to lay out a roadmap for how conversation and, ultimately, cooperation between Peter Singer and the church on ecological issues might proceed.[11] I will begin by highlighting areas of overlap—including a moving and poetic wonder at the beauty of creation, the utter seriousness of the ecological problems we face, and the radical change in lifestyles and public policy necessary to begin to move in an ethically acceptable direction. But especially if we wish to create the conceptual space for cooperation, this article must also address the disagreements and possible stumbling blocks—including the narrative of "how we got here" in facing such serious ecological problems in the first place. While Singer helpfully pushes the church to even more consistently connect its growing tradition on ecological matters with its broader social teaching, I argue that the church, especially because of its teaching on the intrinsic value and interconnectedness of all creation, offers an ecological ethic that resonates more broadly with those concerned about what we are doing to the earth.

A Sense of Wonder at the Beauty of Nature

Singer, ever the hardcore analytic philosopher, spends most of his time making and analyzing arguments. Unsurprisingly, he does not wax poetic very often, but consider these words used to describe his reactions to the beauty of nature:

> [Y]et I have not had, in any museum, experiences that have filled my aesthetic senses in the way that they are filled when I walk in a natural setting and pause to survey the view from

8. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 57; http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html.

9. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 269.

10. See footnote 1 above; http://mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/resources/peter-singer-conference/

11. Though it should be clear from context, when I refer to "the church" it will most often be simple shorthand for the institutional position of the Roman Catholic Church. It certainly is not meant to imply that other representatives of Christianity are not authentic churches. Nor is it meant to imply the positions are laid out here are the only ones that Roman Catholics may take. Furthermore, I will reference many different kinds of documents when discussing church teaching: everything from papal encyclicals, to documents from Vatican congregations, to statements of national bishops' conferences. Each of them have a level of authority in the church, but their precise relationship to the lives of Roman Catholics is far beyond the scope of this article. Happily, given that all statements contribute to the development of the tradition, this limitation will not significantly affect the main goals of this article.

> a rocky peak overlooking a forested valley, or sit by a stream tumbling over moss-covered boulders set amongst tall tree-ferns, growing in the shade of the forest canopy. I do not think I am alone in this; for many people, wilderness is the source of the greatest feelings of aesthetic appreciation, rising to an almost spiritual intensity.[12]

That one of the most public atheists in the world comes close to describing his own experience in nature as "spiritual" is almost as remarkable as the Oxford-trained philosopher's use of flowery language in so doing.

The Roman Catholic Church joins Singer in this reaction. The *Catechism* even explicitly references reactions like his:

> *The beauty of the universe*: The order and harmony of the created world results from the diversity of beings and from the relationships which exist among them. Man discovers them progressively as the laws of nature. They call forth the admiration of scholars. The beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator and ought to inspire the respect and submission of man's intellect and will.[13]

Pope John Paul II raised this point in his *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* way back in 1990:

> FINALLY, THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF CREATION CANNOT BE OVERLOOKED. Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity. The Bible speaks again and again of the goodness and beauty of creation, which is called to glorify God (cf. Gen 1:4ff; Ps 8:2; 104:1ff; Wis 13:3–5; Sir 39:16, 33; 43:1, 9).[14]

The Seriousness of the Ecological Problem

Due in part to a common wonder at the beauty of the natural world, both Singer and the church share a common sense of just how serious our ecological problems actually are. Though we will see in some detail in the following that Singer wants to limit his concern for ecology to a human- (or sentient-creature) centered analysis, he is very clear that even with this limitation "the preservation of our environment is a value of the greatest possible importance."[15] Indeed, he claims that in light of our ecological problems, "we face a new threat to our survival. The proliferation of human beings, coupled with the byproducts of economic growth, is just as capable as the old threats of wiping out our society—and every other society as well."[16] To illustrate the point, consider this suggestion he made recently in a *New York Times* editorial:

> Most thoughtful people are extremely concerned about climate change. Some stop eating meat, or flying abroad on vacation, in order to reduce their carbon footprint. But the people who will be most severely harmed by climate change have not yet been conceived. If there were to be no future

12. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 272.
13. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 341.
14. John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* (Message at the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990), n. 14.
15. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 268.
16. Ibid., p. 285.

> generations, there would be much less for us to feel to guilty about.[17]

Though he ends up rejecting the proposed solution of "making his the last generation on earth," his concern for climate change, as well as for those harmed in future generations, leads him to explore such a dramatic solution.

But his concern for future generations is not limited to his concern for climate change. Indeed, when considering a forest that has been "cut or drowned," he soberly notes that this "link with the past has gone forever." And this is

> a cost that will be borne by every generation that succeeds us on this planet. It is for that reason that environmentalists are right to speak of the wilderness as a "world heritage." It is something that we have inherited from our ancestors, and that we must preserve for our descendents, if they are to have it at all.[18]

In light of "the priceless and timeless value of the wilderness" for future generations, our current cost/benefit calculations, coupled with our consumptive practices, are doing a monstrous harm. For, "there are some things that, once lost, no amount of money can regain."[19] Our "modern political and cultural ethos has great difficultly recognizing long term values," laments Singer, especially in contrast to "many more stable, tradition-oriented human societies."[20]

Christianity has a deep and ancient tradition on the value of creation, and therefore also has a wide and deep response to our current ecological problems. And not only the Catholic Church but the Orthodox and Protestant Christian Churches (including many evangelicals) are pushing back hard against our destructive ecological practices.[21] Indeed, the 1991 Assembly of the World Council of Churches produced one of the first broad-based, non-scientific working groups on climate change.[22] William French nicely summarizes what he takes to be the first seeds of what he calls "the greening" of recent papal thought:

> In the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern, 1987) [Pope John Paul II] articulates sharp limits to use and transformation of nature because "when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones. . . ." This document is the first in the social encyclical tradition to give any sustained attention to ecological issues.[23]

17. Peter Singer, "Should This Be the Last Generation?" *New York Times*, June 6, 2010; http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/should-this-be-the-last-generation/.
18. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 269.
19. Ibid., p. 270.
20. Ibid., p. 269.
21. Although this article focuses on Roman Catholic thought, many Protestants are working on these issues as well: David Gushee, Larry Rasmussen, James Martin-Scramm, Michael Northcott, Christine Gudorf, James Huchingson, and Roger Gottlieb are just a few examples. And the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has been an ecological hero from the Orthodox Christian tradition as well.
22. "Climate Change," *Justice*, *Peace*, *and Creation*, *Concerns*; accessed August 5, 2010, http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/ecearth-climatechange.html.
23. William French, "Catholicism and the Common Good of the Biosphere," in Michael Horace Barnes, ed., *An Ecology of the Spirit: Religious Reflections and Environmental Consciousness* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), pp. 185–86. The social encyclical tradition began in the nineteenth century.

This attention was significantly ahead of its time, and just three years later, during his World Day of Peace address, the pope would again remind us of our "serious obligation to care for all creation."[24]

Reiterations of such serious moral obligations have shown up time and time again in various documents that are authoritative for Roman Catholics. Consider this from the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace:

> He must not "make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray." When he acts in this way, "instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him.". . . The biblical message and the Church's Magisterium represent the essential reference points for evaluating the problems found in the relationship between man and the environment. The underlying cause of these problems can be seen in man's pretension of exercising unconditional dominion over things, heedless of any moral considerations which, on the contrary, must distinguish all human activity.[25]

Though, as we will soon see, these moral considerations can and do focus on the inherent value of all entities of the natural world, most public calls on the part of the Catholic Church for a moral shift are, like those of Singer, connected to the interests of human beings and other sentient creatures.[26]

Specifications of the Problem

We have already seen that Peter Singer is particularly concerned about climate change. And that concern is quite serious:

> According to the World Health Organization, the rise in temperature that occurred between the 1970s and 2004 is causing an additional 140,000 deaths every year (which is equivalent to causing, every week, as many deaths as occurred in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001). The major killers are climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria, dengue, and diarrhoea, which is more common when there is a lack of safe water. Malnutrition resulting from crops that fail because of high temperatures or low rainfall is also responsible for many deaths. Fertile, densely settled delta regions in Egypt, Bangladesh, India and Vietnam are at risk from rising sea levels. The Sunderbans, islands in the Ganges delta that are home to four million Indians, are disappearing—two islands have vanished entirely, and in all an area of land measuring thirty-one square miles has disappeared over the last thirty years. Hundreds of families have had to move to camps for displaced people. Some small Pacific nations like the Maldives, Kiribati and Tuvalu, which consist of low-lying coral atolls, are in similar danger, and within a few decades these nations may be submerged beneath the waves.[27]

24. John Paul II, n. 16.
25. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), n. 217.
26. This, it seems to me, comes out of an understandable concern to avoid something like pantheism or neopaganism. See especially *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 48.
27. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 294.

Some people (and nonhuman animals) will be able to move to avoid the effects of a shifting climate, but many—and especially the most vulnerable—will not have that ability.

The church is also very concerned about climate change. We have already seen how John Paul II was calling for dramatic action on this issue way back in 1990. But such concern is not mere empty rhetoric on the part of the Vatican—especially considering such efforts as the 2007 Pontifical Council on Climate Change and Development (PCCCD).[28] Pope Benedict XVI, who created the PCCCD, speaks about climate change as a very serious matter:

> The promotion of sustainable development and particular attention to climate change are indeed matters of grave importance for the entire human family, and no nation or business sector should ignore them. As scientific research demonstrates the worldwide effects that human actions can have on the environment, the complexity of the vital relationship between the ecology of the human person and the ecology of nature becomes increasingly apparent.[29]

And even before Benedict came on the scene, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops was quite clear where they stood on the matter when they said that the problems of climate change "cannot be easily dismissed" and, indeed, can obligate us to take action intended to avert potential dangers.[30]

But the urgency of meeting the requirements of what the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace calls "the right to a safe and healthy natural environment" is certainly not limited to issues currently described as climate change.[31] Indeed, one issue of particular importance for the church is that of water scarcity. Consider the following disconcerting facts as related by John Allen:

- Though water constitutes more than 75 percent of the earth's surface, less than one percent is readily usable by human beings.
- The Central Intelligence Agency has estimated that by 2015 nearly half the world's population, meaning more than three billion people, will live in countries that are "water-stressed.". . . In addition to northern China, the bulk of these countries are located in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, regions already subject to political instability.
- In the short term, there's not much optimism about turning things around. The CIA predicts that "measures taken to increase water availability and to ease acute water shortages will not be sufficient to substantially change the outlook for water shortages." Those measures include more

28. This concern was again affirmed by the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 470; see also Thalif Deen, "Pontifical Council on Climate Change Development," April 26–27, 2007, *The Religious Consultation on Population*, *Reproductive Health and Ethics*, http://www.religiousconsultation.org/News_Tracker/pontifical_council_on_climate_change.htm.

29. Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to H.E. Mr. Noel Fahey, New Ambassador of Ireland to the Holy See, September 15, 2007; http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070915_ambassador-ireland_en.html.

30. USCCB, "Global Climate Change A Plea for Dialogue Prudence and the Common Good: A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops," June 15, 2001; http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/globalclimate.shtml#scientific.

31. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 470.

efficient use of water, expanding desalinization, developing GMOs that grow on less water, and importing water.

- The average amount of water used daily by one person living in Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Gambia, Mali, Mozambique, Tanzania, or Uganda equals that used by someone in a developing country brushing his or her teeth with the tap running.[32]

The Vatican, upholding an ancient tradition heavily focused on water as a theological resource, has spoken clearly and forcefully about the ecological urgency surrounding this issue:

> *The principle of the universal destination of goods also applies naturally to water*, *considered in the Sacred Scriptures as a symbol of purification* (cf. Ps 51:4; Jn 13:8) *and of life* (cf. Jn 3:5; Gal 3:27). "As a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival; thus, everyone has a right to it." Satisfying the needs of all, especially of those who live in poverty, must guide the use of water and the services connected with it. Inadequate access to safe drinking water affects the well-being of a huge number of people and is often the cause of disease, suffering, conflicts, poverty and even death. . . . *The right to water*, as all human rights, finds its basis in human dignity and not in any kind of merely quantitative assessment that considers water as a merely economic good. Without water, life is threatened. Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right.[33]

32. Allan, *Future Church*, pp. 313–15.
33. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 484 and n. 485.

Local churches are acting on this teaching, especially in light of the practical reality of their current and future water shortages, and Roman Catholic theologians are also starting more serious reflection on the theological and moral significance of water.[34] Its scarcity, therefore, is a particularly urgent example of several ecological crises in which the church should continue to play a leading role in offering both urgent theoretical guidance in the abstract and practical guidance—especially as it rises out of the diocesan and parish levels—about how theory plays out in locally unique situations.

As with Singer, part of the urgency on the part of the church's concern for ecological practices comes from a concern for future generations. Pope John Paul II mentioned this explicitly in his World Day of Peace message, and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* uses language eerily similar to that of Singer[35]:

> *Responsibility for the environment*, *the common heritage of mankind*, *extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future*. "We have inherited from past generations, and we have benefited from the work of our contemporaries: for this reason we have obligations towards all, and we cannot refuse to interest ourselves in those who will come after us, to enlarge the human family." *This is a responsibility that present*

34. Allen, *Future Church*, pp. 315–16. Allan notes examples ranging from the Philippines, to the United States, to South Africa. See, in particular, Christiana Z. Peppard, "A Parched Globe's Search for Water," *Reflections: A Journal of Yale Divinity School*, Fall 2010, pp. 63–65; and Christiana Z. Peppard, "Valuing Water," (diss., Yale University, 2011).
35. John Paul II, n. 6.

> *generations have towards those of the future*, a responsibility that also concerns individual States and the international community.[36]

The theme of "intergenerational solidarity" is one that appears again and again in Pope Benedict XVI's writings (most recently about the worldwide financial crisis[37]), but it is something he explicitly mentions in his authoritative encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* in the section titled "Safeguarding the Environment." He notes that "projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations, but need to be *marked by solidarity and intergenerational justice* [original emphasis], while taking into account a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural."[38]

A Radical Change in Lifestyle

Peter Singer, especially when talking about the personal lifestyle changes necessary to combat the urgency of our ecological problems, pulls no punches:

> At present we see the choice between motor car racing or cycling, between water skiing or windsurfing, as merely a matter of taste. Yet there is an essential difference: motor car racing and water skiing require the consumption of fossil fuels and the discharge of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Cycling and windsurfing do not. Once we take the need to preserve our environment seriously, motor racing and water skiing will no more be an acceptable form of entertainment than bear-baiting is today.[39]

Singer is clear in what, at bottom, needs to change:

> We must re-assess our notion of extravagance. In a world under pressure, this concept is not confined to chauffeured limousines and Dom Perignon champagne. Timber that has come from a rainforest is extravagant, because the long-term value of the rainforest is far greater than the uses to which the timber is put. Disposable paper products are extravagant, because ancient hardwood forests are being converted into wood-chips and sold to paper manufacturers. "Going for a drive in the country" is an extravagant use of fossil fuels that contributes to the greenhouse effect.[40]

After pointing out that some 38 percent of the world's grain is fed to nonhuman animals that humans subsequently consume in various ways, Singer highlights all the ecological problems with this kind of practice:

- Factory farming methods are energy-intensive and are responsible for the consumption of huge amounts of fossil fuels.
- Chemical fertilizers, used to grow the feed crops for non-human animals, produce nitrous oxide—another greenhouse gas.

36. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 467.
37. "Pope Addresses Economic Crisis with Academy for Social Sciences," *Vatican Radio*, April 30, 2010; http://www.radiovaticana.org/EN1/Articolo.asp?c=376305.
38. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 48.
39. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 285.
40. Ibid., pp. 286–87.

- The loss of forests; for example, 25% of the forests of Central America have been cleared for cattle grazing. In addition to the forests never returning, when the forests are cleared billions of tons of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere.
- The world's cattle (thought to produce about 20% of the world's total) and factory-farm manure (because it does not decompose in the presence of oxygen) produce a huge amount of methane—a gas, once released into the atmosphere, which traps 25 times as much heat as does carbon dioxide.[41]

Part of the radical change in lifestyle necessary to address our ecological concerns, for Singer, is that we should eat a plant-based diet.

As important as individual responsibility is in these matters, and it is something that Singer stresses dramatically, often the problems are simply too big, too structurally embedded to be addressed simply through a focus on individual choices. This is why Singer spends a good deal of time arguing for public policy shifts as well. He favors international agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and describes global emissions trading as "both possible and desirable."[42] Aware of the possible problems with such solutions, Singer favors strong regulation and oversight by an international authority such as the United Nations to curb corruption and to enforce provisions of the agreement.[43]

41. Ibid., pp. 287–88.
42. Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 47.
43. Ibid., pp. 48–49.

How these agreements are structured, says Singer, should not be based simply on an "equal share" principle—as if all countries should cut emissions by the same percentage, or even the same percentage based on GDP. Singer suggests that while equality is a fair starting point—it "should prevail unless there are good reasons for moving from it." The only reason for moving from it, he says, is "when doing so helps the worst-off."[44] Indeed, Singer makes the point that developing countries are not only the ones hurt worst by ecological devastation (in part because they do not have the resources to adapt); they also are disproportionately hurt by "equal" emission reductions. For instance, it would be wrong to take an approach that would provide "incentives for Americans to drive more fuel efficient cars" but would also "set limits on China that prevent the Chinese from driving cars at all." Such "egalitarian" policies disproportionately harm the worst off and should therefore be rejected.

We have already seen the *Catechism*'s claim that the "use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives." But can the church really have something approaching Singer's view on how deep such moral imperatives go? The answer is a resounding yes; for, "*every economic activity making use of natural resources* [emphasis added] must also be concerned with safeguarding the environment and should foresee the costs involved, that are an essential element of the actual cost of economic activity."[45] As one might imagine from an ethic that involves "every economic activity making uses of natural resources," what is called for are Singer-like radical changes in lifestyle:

44. Ibid., p. 37.
45. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 470.

> *Serious ecological problems call for an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles*, [original emphasis] "in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of the common good are the factors that determine consumer choices, savings and investments." These lifestyles should be inspired by sobriety, temperance, and self-discipline at both the individual and social levels. There is a need to break with the logic of mere consumption and promote forms of agricultural and industrial production that respect the order of creation and satisfy the basic human needs of all.[46]

Pope Benedict also:

> invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences. What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles* "in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments."[47]

Benedict, now being called by many "the Green Pope," has been something of an ecological hero in making explicit and public efforts to strongly connect moral imperatives toward creation with the church's broader social teaching. Tellingly, this theme was part of his first homily as pope when he noted that the "external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. The earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction."[48]

And this is not mere rhetoric. Under his watch, "the Vatican has become the world's first carbon neutral country" by offsetting its carbon emissions through renewable energies and carbon credits." Benedict has personally led on the topic of renewable energy by instituting projects to put thousands of solar panels on various Vatican buildings—reducing carbon dioxide emissions "by about 225 tons" and saving "the equivalent of eighty tons of oil each year."[49] John Allen notes that "the project captured the 2008 Euro Solar Prize, awarded by the European Association for Renewable Energy, a secular body."[50] This impressive project is part of an even more impressive commitment to have 20 percent of its energy come from renewable resources by 2020.[51]

The church consciously connects its ecological ethic with its universal special concern for the most vulnerable—or, in Singer's parlance, "the worst off." John Paul II makes the connection very early on when pointing out that "the proper ecological balance will not be found without DIRECTLY ADDRESSING THE

46. Ibid., p. 486.
47. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 51.
48. Quoted in Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, *Ten Commandments for the Environment: Pope Benedict Speaks Out for Creation and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009), p. 2.
49. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
50. Allan, *Future Church*, p. 298.
51. Philip Pullella, "Vatican Set to Go Green with Huge Solar Panel Roof," Reuters, November 25, 2008; http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE4AO8C820081125.

STRUCTURAL FORMS OF POVERTY [original emphasis] that exist throughout the world."[52] The current and future water crises affect the poor in particularly difficult ways. Consider the level at which Msgr. Renato R. Martino put these structural forms of poverty in a statement to the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto in 2003:

> Many people living in poverty, particularly in the developing countries, daily face enormous hardship because water supplies are neither sufficient nor safe. Women bear a disproportionate hardship. For water users living in poverty this is rapidly becoming an issue critical for life and, in the broad sense of the concept, *a right to life issue* [emphasis is original].[53]

Not surprisingly, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* goes into significant detail about how ecological issues are connected to the church's social teaching on duties to the poor. Many echoes of Singer can be heard in these words:

> The present environmental crisis affects those who are poorest in a particular way, whether they live in those lands subject to erosion and desertification, are involved in armed conflicts or subject to forced immigration, or because they do not have the economic and technological means to protect themselves from other calamities. . . . It is moreover necessary to keep in mind the situation of those countries that are penalized by unfair international trade regulations and countries with a scarcity of capital goods, often aggravated by the burden of the foreign debt. In such cases hunger and poverty make it virtually impossible to avoid an intense and excessive exploitation of the environment.[54]

Indeed, it is precisely the structural nature of these ecological problems (and their disproportionate effect on the poor) that causes the church to once again agree with Singer: this time about going beyond personal morality with a firm commitment to change both national and international public policy.[55] John Paul II's claim that our ecological problems "point to the necessity of a more internationally coordinated approach to the management of the Earth's goods"[56]—and the *Compendium*'s claim that our ecological problems "can be effectively resolved only through international cooperation"[57]—are just the latest episodes in its centuries-long history of attempting to affect broad-based change across multiple states. Indeed, globalization has produced problems with complexity requiring the kinds of international responses with which the church and Singer are quite comfortable. The church, while not specifically invoking the international economic agreements advocated by Singer, lays out general principles that point in the same direction:

52. John Paul II, *Ecological Crisis*, n. 11.
53. Quoted in Koenig-Bricker, p. 109. See the conclusion of this book for an expansion of how Singer helps the church see the full implications of consistently defending the right to life.
54. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 482.
55. Although this is clearly a classic "both/and" rather than "either/or" approach.
56. John Paul II, n. 9.
57. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 481.

> *An economy respectful of the environment will not have the maximization of profits as its only objective*, *because environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits*. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces. Every country, in particular developed countries, must be aware of the urgent obligation to reconsider the way that natural goods are being used. Seeking innovative ways to reduce the environmental impact of production and consumption of goods should be effectively encouraged.
>
> Particular attention will have to be reserved for the complex issues surrounding *energy resources*. Non-renewable resources, which highly-industrialized and recently-industrialized countries draw from, must be put at the service of all humanity [All emphasis is original].[58]

Narrative and Counternarrative

Perhaps for many who are not familiar with the church's current teaching, much of what has been detailed earlier comes as a surprise. Some may have ruled out cooperation with the church on ecological issues *a priori* because they have been convinced that the Christian tradition is actually hostile to concern for the earth. Indeed, Peter Singer's "bad guy" for how we got to this bad ecological place turns out to be the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although he acknowledges that the dominion given human beings over creation in Genesis 1 is "debated" by Christians, Singer puts on his exegetical hat and claims that there is "little justification in the text for such an interpretation."[59] Indeed, "given the example God set when he drowned almost every animal on earth in order to punish human beings for their wickedness, it is no wonder that people should think the flooding of a single river valley is nothing worth worrying about."[60] He then points to the examples of God's claiming in Genesis 9 that human beings are to act in a way "that causes fear and dread to everything that moves upon the earth," and of Augustine's claims that Jesus cursing the fig tree in Mark 11 is teaching us that refraining from destroying plants "is the height of superstition."[61] He also invokes Thomas Aquinas, who, following Aristotle, "has room only for sins against God, ourselves and our neighbors. There is no possibility of sinning against non-human animals, or against the natural world."[62]

But Singer's thin narrative of what is a rich and complex tradition makes interpretative moves and draws blanket conclusions that are difficult to justify. As Joseph Blenkinsopp points out, this kind of narrative simply leaves out important factors that have contributed to our ecological attitudes but have

> nothing to do with biblical interpretation, or indeed with religious traditions at all. The environment was being devastated and living species rendered extinct long before Christianity and its Bible appeared on the scene. Among

58. Ibid., n. 470.

59. Singer gives little evidence that he is aware of contemporary biblical scholarship (not surprising for an atheist philosopher), but it makes his own textual interpretation problematic, to say the least.

60. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 266.

61. Ibid., pp. 266–67.

62. Ibid., p. 267. It is worth noting that Pope Benedict XVI, as we will soon see, now speaks explicitly of sins against the natural world.

> the numerous examples that come to mind, I mention only the destruction of the Lebanon cedar forests, well underway by the second millennium B.C., and the fate of the Syrian elephant, hunted to extinction by the seventh century B.C. . . . And where the influence of religion *is* demonstrable, it is generally an unforeseen side effect rather than a direct consequence of religious doctrines and practices; as, for example, the contribution of centuries of cremation, required by Hinduism and Buddhism, to the deforestation of India, which in turn has contributed in some measure to the disastrous recent flooding in Bangladesh.[63]

Blenkinsopp also demands more careful biblical interpretation—particularly with regard to the historical context in which the relevant passages were written:

> Critical resources to biblical texts also implies acknowledgement of the fact that they reflect a conceptual universe very different from the one we inhabit. Unlike ourselves, the people of biblical times had no idea of the possibility of modifying or having a serious impact on nature, except perhaps in exceptional circumstances, by congregational prayer or prophetic curse. . . . [And] we lack evidence that biblical writers and audiences were concerned either theoretically or practically with nature as a whole, that is, as a complex unity which could be the object of study; hence is it hardly surprising that there is no word for "nature" in biblical Hebrew.[64]

But even without a concept of nature considered as a whole, Blenkinsopp argues that humanity's use of various entities within it is nevertheless regulated by a biblical "ethic of limitation"—one that flies in the face of the Singer narrative. He cites many different kinds of limitations for how humanity is to treat nonhuman animals that are implicit in the Jewish dietary laws (including humane regulations for how sharp the knife should be in order to slaughter an animal as painlessly as possible), but for the purposes of this article we are interested in nonanimal entities.

One will recall that in Genesis 1 God calls the entire creation "good" independent of human beings, and Blenkinsopp links moral value of nonsentient creation to a biblically described "close connaturality between the soil and human being, between the *adama* and the *adam*, humus and humanity." Indeed, the biblical narrative shows "how the well-being of the earth is in important ways dependent on the what happens in human society, a truth we now realize all too well." Unethical behavior by human beings "results in the ground producing scrub, thorns, and thistles, requiring unremitting labor to provide a living."[65] Later the prophets build on this same theme:

> Hosea connects sickness and death in the animals' world—land animals, birds, and fish—with social transgression, especially the shedding of blood (Hos 4:1–3), and a later,

63. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Global Stewardship: Toward an Ethic of Limitation," in Ryan A. Maura and Todd David Whitmore, eds., *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 39.

64. Ibid., p. 41.

65. Ibid., p. 47.

> anonymous seer makes the same point in more summary fashion in proclaiming that "the earth lives polluted under its inhabitants" (Isa. 24:5).[66]

The Pentateuch often uses personification to express the moral value of the land:

> The land can be rendered unclean, polluted, by the behavior of those who live on it, to the point of having to purge itself, to vomit out its inhabitants (Lev 18:24–30). Like persons, it can also be rendered unclean by contact with unburied cadavers. . . . It needs rest and re-creation, too, no less than human beings; hence the sabbatical or fallow year (Ex 23:10–11, Lev 25:1–7), corresponding to the sabbath rest enjoined in the decalogue for both theological and humanitarian reasons.[67]

Furthermore, and contra Singer, Blenkinsopp argues that there is a very strong basis for reading "dominion" as "stewardship." The Hebrews, much like the surrounding peoples in the Ancient Near East, viewed the land not as something they owned. Rather, "it was held in fief by those to whom the deity leased it out." Indeed, it was this idea that:

> provided the basis for the theory of the inalienability of the ancestral plot of land (Lev. 25:23) and therefore *theoretically* [original emphasis] excluded forced sale, enclosure, and the development of large estates. One had to care for one's piece of patrimonial domain and pass it on undamaged to the next generation. Ultimate ownership by deity was reinforced by practices such as tithing, offering of the first fruits, fallow year, and the year of release which, again theoretically, excluded the granting of leasehold for a person in excess of fifty years (Lev. 25:8–55).[68]

No, while there are problematic passages that must be dealt with, the simplistic narratives of Singer—at least to the extent that it relies on a biblical interpretation—are not adequate.

Responding to the Narrative: The Christian Tradition

The value of the physical world, in part because it was inherited from the Hebraic tradition, is also a major theme of the Christian tradition. Indeed, much of the energy of the early church was directed toward the Gnostics—a fairly diverse group of persons, some of whom saw themselves as Christian, heavily influenced by a certain kind of Platonic understanding of matter and spirit that led them to argue that the physical world was evil. Even the Gospel writers seem to be aware of this controversy and are at pains to show that Jesus' resurrection was not only spiritual but also physical.[69] Our main sources for the debate comes from the church fathers; Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the church's most heroic defenders of the value of the physical world, brought in the big guns by putting the focus on the Eucharist:

66. Ibid., pp. 47–48.
67. Ibid., p. 48.
68. Ibid.
69. Indeed, they are careful to describe him eating on several occasions in part to show precisely this point. Even today, the church still proclaims the resurrection of the body (and not just the soul) for all people.

> Then, again, how can they say that the flesh, which is nourished with the body of the Lord and with His blood, goes to corruption, and does not partake of life? Let them, therefore, either alter their opinion, or cease from offering the things just mentioned. But our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and Spirit. For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.[70]

This understanding of the Eucharist, so says the Orthodox Christian theologian John Zizioulas, is one of the strongest pieces of theological evidence for the value of the material world:

> Ever since Saint Irenaeus it has been understood that the Eucharist is not simply a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, but is a cosmic event involving the whole of creation. Bread and wine are not just symbolic elements linking the Church to the Last Supper but are representative of the material world and of creation. Equally, human beings, by participating in the Eucharist, participate in a redeemed material world. Thus the material world has its place in the Eucharistic experience and in the Kingdom of God.[71]

This view, coupled with Paul's claim that all of creation participates in the mystery of salvation (Eph 1:9–10), led the consensus of the ancient church to a fairly radical and sacramental understanding of the sanctity of all creation. To be sure, human beings mattered more than other forms of life, and use of the earth was legitimate to further human ends. But ancient Christian theology underscores the fact that God's creative effort has resulted in a vital and sacred earth—full of nonhuman beings of significant moral value and worth.

This focus on the value of the material world is passed on to several figures of the Middle Ages[72]—perhaps most famously in the person of St. Francis of Assisi. Though when thinking about Francis, it is likely that nonhuman animals come to mind, most of the stories about him in this regard (including, sadly, his preaching to the birds), though not necessarily false, are hagiographical. But there is a treasure that most historians trace back directly to Francis; it is his famous "Canticle of Brother Sun"—one of the first poems written in the vernacular Italian. Here is a translation by Lawrence Cunningham:[73]

70. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4, 18, 5.

71. Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, "Orthodoxy and Ecological Problems: a Theological Approach," *Orthodox Research Institute*, accessed August 26, 2010; http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/misc/john_pergamon_ecological_problems.htm.

72. This was especially true of the famous medieval mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, etc.—many of whom saw the physical world as full of the directive, transformative power of God.

73. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 99–100.

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord
To You alone belongs praise and glory,
Honor and blessing.
No one is worthy to breathe Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, for all Your creatures.
In the first place for [per] the blessed Brother Sun
Who gives us the day and enlightens us through You.
He is beautiful and radiant in his great splendor
Giving witness to You, most omnipotent One.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars
Formed by You so bright, precious, and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind
And the airy skies so cloudy and serene.
For every weather, be praised because it is life-giving.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water
So necessary yet humble, precious, and chaste.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire
Who lights up the night.
He is beautiful and carefree, robust and fierce.

Be praised, my Lord, for our sister, Mother Earth
Who nourishes and watches over us
While bringing forth abundant fruits and colored
Flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless the Lord. Render him thanks.
Serve him with great humility. Amen.

In extolling the value of the sun, moon, wind, fire, water, and the earth itself, Francis stands clearly within the biblical and patristic traditions mentioned earlier.[74]

Thomas Aquinas was born a year before Francis died. Singer, as we saw earlier, considers Thomas to have devalued the natural world—and he is not alone. As William French points out, many commentators have focused on one organizing principle of Thomas' ethical system: "the absolute superiority of rational human life over all lesser creatures."[75] But Thomas is a complex thinker, and there are other factors and interpretive principles operative in his ethical view. John Berkman points out that his grand picture is of:

> the entire physical universe (for example plants, birds, nonhuman and human animals) ordered toward "ultimate perfection," which is in turn ordered to God, and by its perfection gives glory to the goodness of God. Each creature manifests the goodness of God by living according to its own *telos*. . . . In other words, Aquinas' view is that "[t]he perfection of the universe is marked essentially by the

74. Taking the example of Francis seriously, a group called Catholic Climate Covenant is (with the support of the US bishops) attempting to get Catholics to take the St. Francis Pledge to lead a life that protects God's creation. See "Take the St. Francis Pledge," *Catholic Climate Covenant*, accessed April 30, 2011; http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/the-st-francis-pledge/.

75. French, p. 193. French should be a bit more careful here and note that Thomas believes angels are superior beings to rational human animals.

> diversity of natures, by which the diverse grades of goodness are filled up." Thus, for Aquinas, God's plan in creation, while hierarchical, is by no means anthropocentric.[76]

Indeed, many miss the fact that Thomas's concept of the common good does not limit itself to human beings, or even this planet. When examined through the broad scope of his work, it is a concept that "also employed as a cosmological-ecological principle suggests that all species, including the human, are parts which participate within the greater whole of the universe." Indeed, for Thomas the highest good after God

> among the created things, is the good of the order of the whole universe, since every particular good of this or that thing is ordered to it as to an end . . . and so, each part is found to be for the sake of its whole. Thus, among created things, what God cares for most is the order of the universe.[77]

Thomas' concept of "the universal common good" is yet more evidence of a Christian tradition that—though certainly complex—upholds the value of creation (beyond human and non-human animals) in a way for which the narrative of Singer cannot account.[78]

76. John Berkman, "Towards a Thomistic Theology of Animality," in Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clongh, eds., *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 24.

77. *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 1, 64, para. 10.

78. And this tradition is explicitly acknowledged right up to the church's current teaching. Indeed, the church actually locates our ecological crisis as the fallout of autonomy and freedom-obsessed *secularization* rather than a Judeo-Christian tradition that has attempted to direct moral concern toward the other: "The bonds that unite the world to God have thus been broken. This rupture has also resulted in separating man from the world and, more radically, has impoverished man's very identity. Human beings find themselves thinking that they are foreign to the environmental context in which they live. The consequences resulting from this are all too clear: It is the relationship man has with God that determines his relationship with his fellow men and with his environment. This is why Christian culture has always recognized the creatures that surround man as also gifts of God to be nurtured and safeguarded with a sense of gratitude to the Creator. Benedictine and Franciscan spirituality in particular has witnessed to this sort of kinship of man with his creaturely environment, fostering in him an attitude of respect for every reality of the surrounding world." (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 464.)

Overpopulation

The Catholic Church specifically links its view on population to its broader ethical framework. Here is an essential passage from Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate*:

> In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the

> environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.[79]

But Peter Singer, though he is no population alarmist, is clearly concerned about the population growth of human beings as it impacts on ecological concerns. Indeed, he has argued that the "proliferation of human beings," coupled with our unethical use of resources, could mean even the end of the human race. His environmental ethic "discourages large families" and "forms a sharp contrast to some existing ethical beliefs that are relics of an age where the earth was far more lightly populated."[80] Although in context he is primarily attempting to show how our environmental crisis is significantly caused by the overpopulation of farm animals, he introduces this point by apparently affirming the proposition that "we look darkly at the number of babies being born in poorer parts of the world."[81]

Although the Vatican acknowledges that there is a "close link that exists between the development of the poorest countries, demographic changes and a sustainable use of the environment," and that "an uneven distribution of the population and of available resources creates obstacles to development and a sustainable use of the environment," it nevertheless claims that this "must not become a pretext for political and economic choices that are at variance with the dignity of the human person."[82] Indeed, the church wants to claim that demographic growth is fully compatible with development that respects the integral value of creation.

But how could this be? Isn't the received wisdom for most of us with ecological concerns that the world's ecological problems are due in part to overpopulation? And aren't we headed for exponentially worse problems as the population continues to skyrocket?

This received wisdom is questionable. Many reputable organizations, including the United Nations,[83] have predicted the human race will start depopulating itself toward the end of this century. Indeed, in many developed countries the depopulation process is already well advanced: governments from the Mediterranean, to the former Soviet bloc, to Japan are trying desperately to incentivize their citizens to have more children in order to provide for an aging population. If it is really ecological issues that drive our concern, we should be aware that it is primarily developed countries (with falling population rates) that are threatening the world's ecology with our grossly irresponsible economic and industrial practices. Indeed, as James McHugh points out, "the greatest threat to the environment comes from the lifestyles of the wealthy and affluent who consume far more per capita than do the populations of the developing nations."[84] Any suggestion that we should "look darkly" on poor babies of color being born in the developing world, especially when coming from those leading oil-drenched lifestyles

79. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 51.
80. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 286.
81. Ibid., p. 287.
82. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 483.
83. Their projection was the world population would begin to decline at 9.22 billion in 2075: UN, *World Population to 2300* (New York, United Nations, 2004); http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/longrange2/WorldPop2300final.pdf, 1.
84. James McHugh, "A Catholic Perspective on Population," in Maura and Whitmore, p. 94.

of ridiculous privilege in the developed world, is dubious to say the least.[85]

Intrinsic Value

In its effort to keep the balance between a concern for nature and for the human person, the church is at times less than clear about whether creation, apart from *any* consideration of human beings, has intrinsic (and not merely instrumental) value.[86] In the final sections of this article, I will attempt to show that the church should more energetically affirm such value, and show how this then sets up the most serious and direct disagreement between the church and Singer on the topic of ecological ethics.[87]

Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism—a theory that claims that the ethical life consists in maximizing preference satisfaction for all preference-bearing entities—begins with the claim that "conscious experiences" give the lives of human beings intrinsic value. Such value will, however, also be found in the lives and preferences of nonhuman animals with conscious experiences. In other words, all sentient creatures have preferences that are intrinsically valuable. Indeed, we should "take into account the loss that death inflicts on the animals—the loss of all their future existence, and the experiences that their future lives would have contained."[88] But then Singer, like many environmentalists, wonders if we can go beyond this:

> Should we also give weight, not only to the suffering and death of individual animals, but to the fact that an entire species may disappear? What of the loss of trees that have stood for thousands of years? How much—if any—weight should we give to the preservation of the animals, the species, the trees and the valley's ecosystem, independently of the interests of human beings?[89]

And such questions are not merely the abstract concerns of academic ethics:

> A few years ago the Swiss added to their national constitution a provision requiring "account to be taken of the dignity of creation when handling animals, plants and other organisms." No one knew exactly what it meant, so they asked the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology to figure it out. The resulting report, "The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants," is enough to short circuit the brain.
>
> A "clear majority" of the panel adopted what it called a "biocentric" moral view, meaning that "living organisms

85. Some might argue that the development of the global south constitutes an ecological crisis, but the crisis is one based on lifestyle and not population. Population growth settles (or even reverses) with development.

86. It comes primarily out of a worry connected to a "Gaia" ecological ethic where nature itself is seen as a kind of deity—which is yet another worry that the church shares with Peter Singer.

87. Persons familiar with current academic discussions in ecological ethics might wonder about the whole notion of "intrinsic value" at all—especially because the field appears to be moving between the intrinsic/extrinsic binary. However, I think that there are two good reasons to treat the concept in this article. First, it is the concept that Singer himself uses. Second, the concept is important to understand if nonsentient creation is to be seen as having anything other than value in relation to sentient creation.

88. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 275.

89. Ibid., p. 276.

> should be considered morally for their own sake because they are alive." Thus, the panel determined that we cannot claim "absolute ownership" over plants and, moreover, that "individual plants have an inherent worth."[90]

Singer would not agree with the Swiss on this one, for his ethic "draws the boundary of moral consideration around all sentient creatures, but leaves other living things outside of that boundary." Considerations like "drowning of ancient forests" or "the loss of an entire species" are ethically relevant only in so far as they adversely affect sentient creatures.[91]

Why limit his ethic in this way? Singer thinks that questions like, "What is it like to be a possum drowning?" at least make sense and we can at least answer with, "It must be horrible." But,

> there is *nothing* that corresponds to what it is like to be a tree dying because its roots have been flooded. Once we abandon the interests of sentient creatures as our source of value, where do we find value? What is good or bad for non-sentient creatures, and why does it matter?[92]

Some might respond, at least for living things in nature, that we could find an answer to this question. Obviously, there are things that are good for trees: sunlight, an appropriate amount of water, fertile soil, carbon dioxide, and so on. And things such as extremes of heat and cold, floods, being chopped down for firewood, and so on, are bad. Why not consider the flourishing of a tree to be an intrinsically good thing independent of how it affects the interests of sentient creatures?

Always the practical ethicist, Singer points to the problem of "accessing the relative weights to be given to the flourishing of different forms of life. Is a two-thousand-year-old Huon pine more worthy of preservation than a tussock of grass?"[93] Any answer, it seems to him, would come from feelings of awe for the age, size, and beauty of the tree, as opposed to some kind of intrinsic value in the tree that is not possessed by the grass. Furthermore, why stop with living things like trees? Why not talk about the flourishing of inanimate objects? "Would it really be worse," he says, "to cut down an old tree than to destroy a beautiful stalactite that has taken even longer to grow?"[94] No, we could speak about the "good" of the tree or the stalactite "seeking" its proper end and "flourishing," but because such entities "are not conscious and cannot engage in intentional behavior, it is clear that this language is metaphorical." Indeed, for Singer, it would be akin to claiming "that the 'good' of a guided missile is to blow itself up along with its target."[95]

But Singer has a problem here. Even on his own terms, it is similarly problematic, for instance, to compare the intrinsic value of the experiences of various sentient nonhuman animals wiped out by the damming of a river versus the good brought to various sentient human animals by bringing cheap energy to a poor

90. Wesley Smith, "The Silent Scream of the Asparagus," *Weekly Standard*, May 12, 2008; http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/015/065njdoe.asp.
91. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 277.
92. Ibid., p. 276.
93. Ibid., p. 277.
94. Ibid., p. 278.
95. Ibid., p. 279.

area that was previously without electric power. There are plenty of situations in which Singer's ethic will be forced to deal with the very "incommensurable goods" that he finds problematic in an ethic that upholds the intrinsic value of nonsentient creatures. Singer cannot have it both ways: if such difficult comparisons do not invalidate his own ethic, then they do not invalidate the ethic of those who see intrinsic value outside of the sentient world.[96]

Intrinsic Value: the Church's Position

As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to articulate the Roman Catholic position on the intrinsic value of creation. This is because, in classic "both/and" fashion, the church is always trying to balance two important considerations:

> *A correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be manipulated and exploited. At the same time, it must not absolutize nature and place it above the dignity of the human person himself.* In this latter case, one can go so far as to divinize nature or the earth, as can readily be seen in certain ecological movements that seek to gain an internationally guaranteed institutional status for their beliefs.[97]

Nevertheless, despite these worries and qualifications, the official teaching of the church is that nonsentient creatures have intrinsic value. Consider various claims from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on this topic:

> God himself created the visible world in all its richness, diversity and order. Scripture presents the work of the Creator symbolically as a succession of six days of divine "work," concluded by the "rest" of the seventh day. On the subject of creation, the sacred text teaches the truths revealed by God for our salvation, permitting us to "recognize the inner nature, the value and the ordering of the whole of creation to the praise of God."[98]
>
> God wills the *interdependence of creatures*. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.[99]
>
> There is a *solidarity among all creatures* arising from the fact that all have the same Creator and are all ordered to his glory.[100]

96. I actually suspect that what is going on in this debate, at bottom, is a battle of intuitions. Singer simply has the intuition that nonsentient creation cannot have intrinsic value while others do not. This suspicion is consistent with something else we learned at the Oxford conference: Singer, after spending decades denying it, has now accepted that certain preferences can be irrational. Apparently Derek Parfit (in his important new book *On What Matters*) has convinced Singer that we can come to such conclusions via "rational intuition." See: Peter Singer, "The Most Significant Work in Ethics Since 1873," *Times Literary Supplement* (May 20, 2011).
97. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 463.
98. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 337.
99. Ibid., n. 338.
100. Ibid., n. 344.

> The Word of God and his Breath are at the origin of the being and life of every creature. (Cf. Ps 33:6; 104:30; Gen 1:2; 2:7; Eccl 3:20–21; Ezek 37:10.)[101]

More traditional Roman Catholics reading these quotes might be surprised to see the *Catechism* teaching that "inner value," "interdependence," "solidarity," and "God's Breath" exists in all creatures, but it is certainly not the only authoritative document to speak about this kind of value. Here are some more important claims from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*:

> *The whole of creation participates in the renewal flowing from the Lord's Paschal Mystery*, although it still awaits full liberation from corruption, groaning in travail (cf. Rom 8:19–23), in expectation of giving birth to "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1).[102]
>
> He must not "make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray." When he acts in this way, "instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him."[103]

101. Ibid., n. 703.
102. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 455.
103. Ibid., n. 460.

And in *Caritas in Veritate*, after once again reminding us that nature is not more important than the human person, Pope Benedict XVI offers the following:

> 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.[104]

Benedict even speaks of a "covenant between human beings and the environment" that governs humanity's stewardship and indicates a value of nature which goes well beyond the good of human beings.[105] Indeed, the concept of a covenant with creation, as French points out, goes back to the Hebrew Bible:

> Likewise, while we have long tended to emphasize God's special covenant to Israel, and broadly to all of humanity created in the *imago Dei*, scholars and pastors have been much slower to give proper weight to the general covenant to all of creation which God announces to Noah after the flood subsided. This covenant, God announces, is "between you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. . . ." (Gen 9:12). . . . The Noachic [*sic*] covenant serves as an important scriptural resource for grounding the

104. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 48.
105. Ibid., n. 50.

> biospheric expansion of our notion of the community whose good should be served and protected.[106]

The concept of the intrinsic value of nature, as described in particular by Benedict, has even made recent news headlines in the *National Catholic Reporter*:

> Though few might have cast him in advance as a "green pope," Pope Benedict XVI has amassed a striking environmental record, from installing solar panels in the Vatican to calling for ecological conversion. Now the pontiff has also hinted at a possible new look at the undeclared patron saint of Catholic ecology, the late French Jesuit scientist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.
>
> Benedict's brief July 24 reference to Teilhard, praising his vision of the entire cosmos as a "living host," can be read on multiple levels—as part of the pontiff's rapprochement with the Jesuits, or as a further instance of finding something positive to say about thinkers whose works have set off doctrinal alarms, as Benedict previously did with rebel Swiss theologian and former colleague Hans Küng.[107]

And this intrinsic value has been described in such strong and clear language that the conceptual space has now been cleared to speak even of sin that is specifically directed *against nature*. Indeed, both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Christian hierarchy have now publically supported this concept—to the bewilderment of much of the news media that cannot quite fit this sin into the narrative of traditional Christianity that is often advanced in the public sphere.[108]

Official church teaching, buoyed by important stands in its (admittedly complex) biblical and historical tradition, is clearly on the side of intrinsic value. Creation's worth does not come from merely how it can be used, but rather it has its own internal coherence that demands the moral respect of human persons. Indeed, as we saw above, all of creation is pronounced "good" by God independent of instrumental use of human persons and other sentient creatures. Not surprisingly, many important modern Roman Catholic thinkers agree with this conclusion. Perhaps surprisingly, they come from diverse ideological backgrounds.

Indeed, Elizabeth Johnson and Germain Grisez, two giants of contemporary Catholic thought (especially in the American context), take very similar approaches. For those familiar with the terrain of Roman Catholic intellectual landscape over the past quarter century, it might seem odd to connect these two thinkers on much of anything—to say nothing of an issue like the one under consideration in this article. But the notion of the intrinsic value of all creation so permeates the Catholic tradition that neither thinker can escape it. Though they use somewhat different language and

106. French, p. 189.

107. John L. Allen Jr., "Pope Cites Tielhardian Vision of the Cosmos As a 'Living Host,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, July 28, 2009; http://ncronline.org/news/ecology/pope-cites-teilhardian-vision-cosmos-living-host.

108. Richard Owen, "Vatican Adds Seven New Deadly Sins Including Damaging Environment and Drug Dealing," March 11, 2008; http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,336330,00.html; and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Sins against Nature and God: We Are All Accountable for Ignoring the Global Consequences of Environmental Exploitation," May 7, 2010; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew/sins-against-nature-and-g_b_567993.html.

images in expressing their ideas, the pioneer of Roman Catholic feminist theology and the founder of the "new natural law" school of moral theology, share a commitment to the intrinsic value of all creation.

Johnson, for instance, claims that a "the Creator Spirit dwells at the heart of the natural world" and compassionately holds "all creatures in their finitude and death."[109] When seen "in the light of this continuous divine presence, the natural world, instead of being divorced from what is sacred, takes on a sacramental character"—that is, material things "can be bearers of divine grace."[110] Far from merely having instrumental value, the Creator Spirit extends "divine solidarity to all creatures." Even the earth itself "is met by the Spirit, who groans with the labor pains of all creation to bring the new to birth (Rom 8:22)."[111] Grisez agrees with Johnson that the earth itself "shares in [Adam's] redemption" just as it shared in Adam's fall.[112] Indeed, all subpersonal entities "have a value of their own" and an "intrinsic goodness." Ever the moral theologian, Grisez moves quickly to claim that such inherent value and goodness "imply some general norms" that should lead us to treat all of creation with "piety" and "great respect."[113]

Conclusion

Despite the significant differences mentioned here, most of this article has seen broad and perhaps surprising areas of overlap between Peter Singer and the Roman Catholicism on matters related to ecological concern. Both approaches speak movingly of the wonder elicited by the beauty of nature. Both identify the utter seriousness of the ecological issues we face—with a special concern for how they affect future generations and especially vulnerable populations. Perhaps most importantly, both agree that our response to the ecological crisis must be a radical rethinking of the waste and privilege that exists in the oil-soaked lifestyles of the developed world. Indeed, both make the radical claim that *every* choice we make must take into consideration the way in which such a choice affects the ecological world around us.

The disagreements that exist between Singer on the Catholic Church on these matters, though important to address, are simply not enough to stop Singer from helping push Christians on the moral seriousness of the impact we have on nature. Nor are they enough to stop Singerites and Christians from actively cooperating together to create new communities and structures that lighten the footprint of humanity on creation. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Peter Singer himself suggested precisely this at a conference recently held at Oxford designed to put his thought in conversation with Christian ethics.[114] And given the relative influence of each approach in our modern world, what an example of the "emerging alliance between secular environmental organizations and institutional religion" this could turn out to be![115] Indeed, the very survival of life as we know it might turn on whether this

109. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping the Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 191.
110. Ibid., p. 189.
111. Ibid., p. 190.
112. Germain Gabriel Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Dallas: Saint Paul Press, 2008), p. 779.
113. Ibid., pp. 771–72.

114. Singer also suggested that there was room to work together on global poverty and treatment of nonhuman animals.
115. Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*: *Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 148.

kind of cooperation can be effective in dramatically challenging the lifestyles of those in the developed world.

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