

***Taripato* and Integral Ecology: Ecological Responsibility from an Ilocano Perspective**

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Abstract: Ecological responsibility, as emphasized in *Laudato Si'*, is rooted in the understanding that an essential aspect of being human is the commitment to care for the environment. In the Ilocano language, this committed practice is expressed through the concept of “*taripato*,” which encompasses nurturing and protecting, depending on context usage. Drawing from the praxis of *taripato*, this paper attempts to contextualize *Laudato Si'*’s teachings on ecological responsibility by interpreting it from an Ilocano perspective. This perspective characterizes environmental care as nurturing connections, recognizing our life source, and showing respect not only because we benefit from the environment but because it is integral to life. Following a lexical exploration of the meaning of *taripato*, the paper concludes by offering insights on ecological responsibility.

Keywords: Ecological Responsibility • Environmental Ethics • Filipino Philosophy • Integral Ecology • *Laudato Si'* • *Taripato* • *Nakem*

Introduction

The Ilocano care for the environment is implicit in the term *nakem*, which is understood as the holistic, interior, and non-compartmentalized sense of inner self. Its dimensions span the intellectual, the volitional, the emotional, and the ethical aspects of the human person.¹ In other words, *nakem* involves the totality of human personhood. This means that the Ilocano looks at oneself as whole—a full person who is at once conscious of one’s

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¹ Leonardo N. Mercado, “Understanding the Philosophy of Buot-Loob-Nakem,” *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts* 6, no. 2 (2017), 4-8.

inherent dignity and freedom, way of life, ethical discernment, spirituality, and manner of relationship with humans and non-humans. In its ethical sense, *nakem* also presupposes the “Ilocano ethos of self-understanding”—that is, the self-revelatory, relational, and perceptive character of a person, enabling one to partake in a discursive participation in upholding and shaping the community’s moral imperatives and ideals.²

Nakem is normative as it embodies the community’s noble teachings (*panursuro*), ideals, and moral standards understood as *pagrebbengan*—which can be interpreted as “duty,” a corollary to *nakem* understood as “responsibility.” On one hand, a person is at peace and has a clear conscience when one’s thoughts and actions align with the community’s noble values. Such a person is regarded as a *nanakem a tao* (a wise and responsible individual) and is considered to have a *naimbag a nakem* (a virtuous disposition). On the other hand, a person who acts or thinks contrary to these values is deemed *awan-an-nakem* (thoughtless, unconcerned, and irresponsible). Thus, the flourishing of self in Ilocano culture involves both maximizing personal capacities and contributing to the collective well-being of the community.³ This mutually-enriching relationship between the subject and society is to be understood both as a project and an ideal. Mutual enrichment suffers when the subject falters or society fails or when both suffer from fragmentation or collapse.

As an integrated sense of inner self, *nakem* is understood through the fourfold Ilocano frames (*uppat a pannuli*) of self: cultural, ecological, communal, and

² Danilo S. Alterado, “Nakem ken Ulimek: A Hermeneutic of Silence in Ilokano Cosmic Self,” in *Wisdom and Silence: Essays on Philippine Nakem Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Academy Press of Amsterdam, 2021), 15-16.

³ Alterado, “Nakem ken Ulimek,” 15-16.

religious.⁴ First, the cultural frame offers a web of meanings that support or form the Ilocano's sense of simplicity predisposed by hard work and frugal lifestyle. This is reinforced by a durable sense of resourcefulness and resilience amidst geographical limitations. The ethos of respect and humility in daily interactions forms a deep cultural structure. Second, the ecological frame highlights the Ilocano's deep and intuitive awareness about one's environment. This may be reflected through environmental care and the adoption of ecological community spirit that encompasses both human and non-human beings. Nature is regarded not in a modern exploitative-utilitarian sense but through an existential and relational attitude, evident in respectful appellations like "*Apo Init*" (Lord Sun) and "*Apo Langit*" (Lord Heaven). Third, the communal frame emphasizes traditional close-knit ties, where relationships are maintained by upholding communal values, underscoring *nakem's* communal and relational essence. Lastly, the religious frame illustrates the Ilocano's Christianity imbued with indigenous temper. Religion is one of the major formative elements of character and orientation. Belief in a transcendent reality, spirits, the afterlife, and God—addressed as "*Apo*"—reveals the profound spiritual dimension of *nakem*.

The fourfold frames are interconnected, integrated, and complementary, forming a holistic self-understanding that permeates an Ilocano's way of perceiving and engaging with the world. Thus, *nakem* encompasses the Ilocano way of knowing oneself, relating to others in the community, co-existing with nature, and connecting with the Divine.⁵ Furthermore, these frames signify *nakem* as a sense of home or dwelling for the

⁴ Ibid., 18-20.

⁵ Aurelio S. Agcaoili, *Balabala ti Filosofia nga Ilokano* (Honolulu: Undertow Books, 2016), 60.

Ilocano. Alterado describes this sense of dwelling: “To dwell, to be at home means to be at peace. To dwell is to preserve each thing in its wholeness. It is to care for the things surrounding us. Fundamentally, it means to remain at peace... within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence.”⁶ This understanding reflects the Ilocano’s inherent inclination to transform and care for the environment, creating an ideal dwelling where peace and abundance could flourish.

From the angle of *nakem*’s ecological frame, the Ilocano holds a profound and enduring connection with the land. This connection is described as the “friendly and familiar when man [sic] the caretaker knows how to take care of it.”⁷ The land is perceived not merely as a physical space, but also as a gift and a source of blessings that sustain life—a concept understood as *kadagaan* in Ilocano culture. It embodies the idea that the land is a divine grace bestowed on those who diligently work to live a good life.⁸ This belief underscores the reciprocal relationship between the land and its caretakers; as the land provides sustenance and nourishment, it necessitates responsible stewardship.

Integral to this stewardship is the act of *taripato*, an Ilocano term that encompasses the acts of caring, nurturing, and fostering of something one holds in significant value. It reflects the Ilocano ethos of sacrificial love when used in a relational context. Nonetheless, in an ecological context, it may reflect the Ilocano framework for ecological responsibility emphasizing the need to care

⁶ Danilo S. Alterado, “Introduction,” in *Wisdom and Silence: Essays on Philippine Nakem Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Academy Press of Amsterdam, 2021), xx.

⁷ Aurelio S. Agcaoili, “Nakaparsuaan, Kadagaan, and Panaglunit ti Daga: Climate Justice and Environmental Ethics in Ilokano Life,” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 12, no.3 (2018), 15.

⁸ Agcaoili, “Nakaparsuaan, Kadagaan, and Panaglunit ti Daga,” 14-15.

for the land to maintain its health and vitality. To care for the environment—following the ecological frame of *nakem*, the implications of *kadagaan* and *taripato* for ethical reflection—is not only about preserving the land for the present, but also ensuring its wealth to sustain the needs of future generations. Pope Francis’ *Fratelli tutti* affirms the Ilocano ethos in the following:

To care for the world in which we live means to care for ourselves. Yet we need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home. Such care does not interest those economic powers that demand quick profits. Often the voices raised in defence of the environment are silenced or ridiculed, using apparently reasonable arguments that are merely a screen for special interests. In this shallow, short-sighted culture that we have created, bereft of a shared vision, “it is foreseeable that, once certain resources have been depleted, the scene will be set for new wars, albeit under the guise of noble claims.”⁹

This passage reiterates the teaching on integral ecology earlier mentioned in *Laudato Si’* and articulated as the integral vision that sees all creatures as interconnected.¹⁰

The main aim of this paper is to argue for *taripato* as the Ilocano praxis of environmental care stemming from the foundational notion of *nakem*. Seen from the lens of *nakem* as a theoretical framework, *taripato* is the act of a *nanakem a tao* (that is, a responsible and wise person). This paper also examines how the Ilocano term *taripato*

⁹ Francis, *Fratelli tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (October 3, 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, 17. Hereafter referred as FT in text.

¹⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si’: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, 70. Hereafter referred as LS in text.

may serve as a framework to contextualize the notion of integral ecology as the foundation for environmental care and ecological responsibility from an Ilocano perspective. This exploration shall begin with a mapping out of philosophical perspectives on ecological responsibility, discussing how each of them is a framework for environmental action. In the second section, the Church's teaching on integral ecology will be covered, tracing how it responds to the philosophical perspectives on ecological responsibility. In the third section, the lexical meaning of *taripato* will be explored on how it implies a continuous effort of care and nurturance with the environment in a relational sense, and from this exploration, arguments presenting it as an Ilocano ethics of environmental care shall be articulated. This study concludes by interpreting ecological responsibility from an Ilocano perspective with *taripato* as the driving force for an environmental ethos, thus contextualizing the idea of integral ecology.

Perspectives on Ecological Responsibility

To care for the environment is to be aware of the presence and needs of other beings and be sensitive to their welfare. In other words, we care for the environment beyond reasons for utilization, preservation, and conservation. Thus, being responsible for the environment means we care for it because caring defines our humanity.

Caring begins with having the right mindset and perspective. Having the right mindset and perspective means seeing reality as an integrated whole.¹¹ "Seeing" or "perceiving" is construed as being conscious of the details of my experience through the full engagement of

¹¹ See Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," *Philosophical Inquiry* 8, issue 1/2 (Winter 1986): 10-31.

all my senses. This sensory engagement can be communicated by humans through language.¹²

Thus, seeing is more than seeing with the eyes. To experience the world is to be fully immersed in it. This elucidates the main point of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception: a fundamental, embodied experience that involves the entire body in relation to the environment.¹³ Being ecologically responsible encompasses the four facets of seeing: awareness, immersion, contemplation, and response. These affirm that seeing is not just cognitive but also an embodied experience. Seeing as embodied is a vital element in intersubjectivity—I make myself present right where I am to position myself to encounter others and allow them to encounter me.

The practice of ecological responsibility is founded on the belief that being in the world does not only mean existing, but it also means humans are there in relation with other beings.¹⁴ There is a responsibility because there is a relationship. Humans, by their free will and moral capacity, are bound to be responsible for nature because they are related to the environment. The human capacity to think and create points out the role of humans as stewards in the world who can enrich the environment and other beings. The experience of human existence in the world is the call to exercise human creativity through an engagement with nature. Rodriguez et al. wrote:

Being creative means engaging the world in a way that allows human beings to use their ability to understand

¹² John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 5.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1962).

¹⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 50-53.

the world and other beings in a way that is not destructive. It must not only be not destructive but we must also act in a way that actually allows other beings to flourish. The allowing of other beings to flourish means not interfering with their natural existence, and if possible, contributing to their development.¹⁵

Humans are dwellers within nature. Being ecologically responsible, the relationship between humans and nature goes beyond utility and moves towards mutual care.¹⁶ Leopold defines this relationship as a community that emphasizes the human person as the nurturer of nature and not its conqueror.¹⁷ To be distinctively human means protecting culture—by cultivating care and nurturing respect through which we reclaim our place in nature as dwellers and stewards. Dwelling in nature means co-existing with non-human beings and treating the earth as common home.¹⁸

Most often modern humans tend to be exploitative and calculative in their thinking to maximize utility. But then, such an attitude inordinately prioritizes the production of more advanced technology that degrades the natural environment.¹⁹ The exercise of ecological

¹⁵ Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez, Jacqueline Marie J. Tolentino, and Roy Allan B. Tolentino, *Doing Philosophy: An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Human Person* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2018), 64.

¹⁶ Erazim Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (New York: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 212-214.

¹⁷ Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *Applying Ethics*, edited by J. Olen and V. Barry (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1999), 460-469.

¹⁸ Mark Joseph T. Calano, Mark Oliver D. Pasco, Marie Chris B. Ramoya, *Philosophizing and Being Human* (Quezon City: Sibis Publishing House, 2016), 65-66.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and Hans Freund (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 46, 54-55.

responsibility should also involve the habit of meditative thinking through which humans may not just perceive nature in terms of utility but also as a meaning-giving reality. Creativity does not only involve constructing edifices and tools. It is also about being caring and kind—that is, working to promote the human and non-human beings' flourishing.²⁰

Seen from the lens of human creativity, care presupposes a profound level of awareness that makes us more attentive to the well-being of other species and beings in the world. The care for the environment thus calls for mindfulness. Rodriguez et al. also proposed ways to implement such mindfulness on the level of practice: “Being open to their presence, learning the different ways of knowing reality, and listening to people to test our knowledge and enrich it, are the best ways of becoming mindful of nature.”²¹ Such ways involve assessing the impact of consumption and how they affect the environment in general, comprehending our place in the natural community by pursuing human flourishing and progress without sacrificing nature.²²

More importantly, care for the environment goes beyond environmental slogans such as “clean and green” projects and “tree parenting” activities in the neighborhood. Mindfulness here demands that we go beyond having pleasant surroundings with the motivation of such environmental slogans or policies; instead, we do them to gain a deeper appreciation of nature and its inherent goodness.

²⁰ See Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “The Praxis and Theory of Environmental Marxism,” *Journal of Dharma* 39, 4 (October-December 2014): 319-334.

²¹ Rodriguez et al., *Doing Philosophy*, 67.

²² Nora Räthzel and David Uzzell, “Transformative Environmental Education: A Collective Rehearsal for Reality,” *Environmental Educational Research* (2009): 265, DOI: 10.1080/13504620802567015

Philosophy, through environmental ethics, could provide a foundational perspective and framework for developing our ecological conscience to care for the environment.²³ Philosophy is not merely a desire for knowledge but an active pursuit of truth and wisdom. Wisdom also involves recognizing the limits of our understanding, offering well-grounded justifications for our beliefs, discerning what truly matters in life, and applying this knowledge in practical ways that demonstrate thoughtfulness.²⁴

In this section, we established that the exercise of responsibility involves examining beliefs that dispose humans to behave and cause either damage to or protection of the environment. Correcting destructive beliefs that determine dispositions may rectify human mistakes and could promote the protection of the environment as common home. Such an endeavor is already a desirable praxis. Hence, ecological responsibility is at once a moral and epistemic issue.

***Laudato Si'* on Integral Ecology**

Pope Francis identified and challenged two approaches that promote negative dispositions toward the environment. The first approach is the technocratic mindset which maintains the systematic practice of exploitation of resources and holds the belief that resources are in infinite supply. Yet, this is the very

²³ Francis Julius N. Evangelista and Napoleon M. Mabaquiao Jr., *Ethics: Theories and Applications* (Mandaluyong: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2020), 227.

²⁴ Napoleon M. Mabaquiao Jr., *Making Life Worth Living: An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Human Person* (Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House, 2017), 14-15. See Napoleon M. Mabaquiao Jr., "Philosophy and the Challenge of Environmental Crisis," *Kemanusiaan: The Asian Journal of Humanities* (2024): 85, DOI: 10.21315/kajh2024.31.1.5.

practice and notion that move moderns to squeeze the earth dry of its wealth. It has also been the root cause of evils like the illegal seizure of ancestral lands, wars, environmental degradation, and health's exposure to harm.²⁵ Eventually, this leads to the second approach which is modern anthropocentrism.²⁶ This is the pervasive human-centered outlook that compromises the integrity of Creation. Because people generally assume that the earth can withstand limitless exploitation, they tend to think that they are “making the most of it” so they can generate profitable gains, which is also a manifestation of what Heidegger called as “calculative thinking.”²⁷ In reality, these are symptoms of an abusive and hegemonic attitude that regards other beings and things as resources—either as raw materials or dumping grounds that no longer serve humanity’s “progressive development.”²⁸

It is without doubt that modern/advance modern science and technology have been beneficial in producing significant means of improving the quality of human life. It made human work and production costs more bearable. The technological advancements also opened up new opportunities and offered a unique way of understanding the potential of further development of natural resources. But with these new opportunities come new concerns. As technology advances, consequential problems follow: inequalities, marginalization of the disadvantaged, fragmentation of cultures, poverty, climate change, and environmental degradation.

²⁵ Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “Amplifying *Laudato Si'* With the Science of Epigenetics,” *MST Review* 21 no. 2 (2019): 1-20.

²⁶ Francis, *LS*, 115-120.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 46, 51-52.

²⁸ Francis, *FT*, 18-21.

Pope Francis warned against the abuse of technological power.²⁹ It must not be elevated beyond their function to the point of controlling humans. Humans control technology, and it is not the other way around. Thus, in this case, there is a need for a profound interior ecological conversion by which we examine ourselves and evaluate our lifestyles in producing and consuming goods.³⁰ By so doing, we give time to appropriate sustainable and healthy progress so that we can have enough space and time to still appreciate or recover our most profound values. As the global community strives to advance with its sophisticated technologies, it is equally its obligation to work on advancing the sense of responsibility, human values, and conscience.

Both Christian philosophers and theologians hold that the human person, as *imago Dei*, is called for responsible stewardship, that is, invited to espouse care for both the environment and people.³¹ Progress that neglects the intrinsic worth of every living being is not true progress at all. Moreover, a development that is not “human” is yet another tool for oppression and inequality, because only the privileged tend to benefit from the best of human work and production. From the lens of responsible stewardship, technology must elevate the quality of human living, and it should render us to be more creative and caring.

²⁹ Ibid., 27-28.

³⁰ Francis, *Global Compact on Education* (October 15, 2020), 3-4, accessed from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201015_videomessaggio-global-compact.html; *LS*, 218-220; *FT*, 114.

³¹ Jeane C. Peracullo, “Human Stewardship and its Critics,” *Philippiniana Sacra* (2009): 492, 497-498, <https://philsacra.ust.edu.ph/admin/downloadarticle?id=137378DA8F5A1BC3D752C727EBBA46F7>.

The earth is not only our common home—it is also our common experience. In it we live, learn about life, and understand the mystery of human existence. Without Earth, human existence would cease. To be precise, the mutual interdependence between nature and humanity underscores the latter's responsibility to care for the former, and the former's role in sustaining the existence of the latter.

As a response to the technocratic mindset, modern anthropocentrism, and the throwaway culture, the Church's teaching on integral ecology emphasizes the interrelationship between humans and all of nature: we are meant to behold all of Creation as our brothers and sisters and as beings in relationship with God.³² Protecting the environment is also a matter of social justice because environmental concern is at once a social, cultural, and spiritual matter.

Integral ecology essentially covers the environmental, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of our daily life. As a holistic approach in working on improving the quality of life, its application as environmental care must be restorative of the dignity of the people, especially the poor, while protecting nature at the same time. Ceasing to exploit the world for human purposes also means looking at the value of human work and labor as an expression of human dignity. Without meaningful work, there would be no sense of fulfillment in one's life, and eventually human capital erodes.

Integral ecology thus refers to the interconnectedness of all elements in Creation, emphasizing that relationship is not limited to human relationships alone, but also extends to relationships with non-human beings. Human beings are integral to the ecological order, and we are not above that order; we are in it. Such a relationship is

³² Francis, *LS*, 11-14; *Global Compact*, 3-4.

essentially moral because nature has indispensable significance for human existence, considering that the human person as a moral being possesses the imperative to care for the environment in a way that promotes creativity and flourishing.³³

Having a common experience as one community together is a solid basis to forge a common ground for us to examine the reality of socio-environmental issues. The common ground includes both human dignity and ecology as points of reference, so it is not simply a matter of looking for different shades of perspective on the issues, but rather an active and collaborative endeavor for collective action beginning with the local communities' quality of life.

Raising the quality of living means providing more opportunities where people get higher chances of living a fulfilled life, with and for others, under a just society. The collective task therefore is to orient our actions, decision, and policies toward improving human living conditions in both urban and rural areas and this is done through ecological education.³⁴

The point of integral ecology as a way for environmental care is also proactive in the sense that communities are involved in searching for solutions. Called to have an integrated outlook on life and to recognize the basic interconnection between humans and

³³ Jeane C. Peracullo and Rosa Bella M. Quindoza, "The Environmental Activism of a Filipino Catholic Faith Community: Re-imagining Ecological Care for the Flourishing of All," *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): 56, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010056>.

³⁴ Patricia Joy Mobilla, "Developing a Culture of Care: Ecological Education According to *Laudato Si'*," *Scientia* 12, no. 2 (2023): 12-13, <https://doi.org/10.57106/scientia.v12i2.143>; John Ken Francisco and Niño Randy Flores, "Ecological Communion: Integration of *Laudato Si'* in Christian Faith Formation in CICM Schools," Conference Paper presented at 11th HCU International Conference, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, Thailand, July 2024.

Creation, it is a must to have a fundamental U-turn in the way we see the world. Hence, environmental advocacy is more than making a moral stand—it is a spirituality that is borne out of interconnectedness and common responsibility for all of Creation.

***Taripato* as Environmental Care**

This section explores *taripato*, analyzed through the lens of *nakem*, as foundational for the Ilocano ethics of environmental care. It begins with an examination of the word's lexical meaning to uncover how *taripato* serves as the Ilocano framework for ecological responsibility. From the fourfold frame (*uppat a pannuli*) of *nakem*, it could be drawn that *nakem* presupposes a sense of dwelling in one's land (ecological frame) grounded in the community's way of life (cultural frame), spirituality (religious frame), and relational engagement with others (communal frame). Considering that environmental care is one of the distinctive strengths of the Ilocano culture, the Ilocano recognizes the inherent connection of the self to nature. Nurturing this connection is *taripato*, and this shall be understood via the concepts of *dungngo* and *nakem*.

Taripato is commonly translated in the Iloco language as “care.” Besides care, it can also mean “nurturing,” “safeguarding,” and “sustaining,” depending on its contextual usage. Essentially, this word reflects the general Ilocano experience of caring for and protecting something or someone due to the value and profound meaning associated with the object of care. Such care is to be understood in a relational sense such as guiding a person towards his or her “*pagsayaatan*” (i.e., well-being; good) in a manner that elevates his or her “*nakem*” (i.e., intellectual, emotional, ethical, and volitional inner-life).

According to Agcaoili (2012), the contemporary meaning of *taripato* possesses two senses.³⁵ The first sense highlights *taripato* as paying attention to something important. It involves an act of active listening that fosters mindfulness. This means that *taripato*, that is, to care for someone or something is to look after their well-being beyond utilitarian-transactional motives. It also denotes a sense of managing or administering in the sense that “I take thorough care of the allowance granted to me by my mother to sustain my needs and respect her efforts”. In other words, the first sense of the word denotes that we care because someone or something was entrusted to us. The second sense of the meaning of *taripato* frames it as “providing loving attention.” This encapsulates the notion of safeguarding and nourishing something or someone with an awareness of their vitality, significance, and vulnerability. This bears the relational sense of meaning because it also carries the sacrificial aspect—that is, caring for someone or something as offering the best of oneself and the best of one’s portion of time in one’s human existence to sustain and vivify an object of one’s care.

Similarly, Carro’s interpretation of *taripato* denotes care and nourishment as in the second sense of Agcaoili’s rendition. However, the emphasis of meaning describes *taripato*’s usage in conversation as fostering someone or something’s growth and development. Such emphasis highlights being solicitous, thoughtful, heedful, considerate, and prudent. According to Carro (1888) and Vanoverbergh (1956), *taripato* as care is an act of “breathing life” into another and this gives the notion that to care for someone or something is to nurture and

³⁵ Aurelio Agcaoili, *Kontemporaneo a Diksionario nga Ilokano-Ingles/ Contemporary Ilokano-English Dictionary* (Quezon City: Cornerstone of Arts and Sciences Publishing, 2012), 1622.

protect them with one's own life.³⁶ In the same fashion, Gelade (1993), building on the works of his confrere, Vanoverbergh's Ilocano lexicography, infers that the meaning of *taripato* is dependent on its contextual usage. It could mean *caring, safeguarding, providing, nurturing, sustaining*.³⁷

In these lexical senses of meaning, it can be observed that *taripato* is inherently understood as an active verb. Even when used as a noun (i.e., *panagtaripato*), it still denotes an ongoing activity. Its ordinary usage in language highlights an action in progress. Hence, for the Ilocano mind, to care for someone or something profoundly and lovingly is an active endeavor that describes a dynamic movement, a travel of meaning that communicates significance and value (which is understood in Iloco language as *pateg*). In other words, I care because it is meaningful; it is meaningful because I found my life and reason for existence in what and whom I love.

From the lens of *nakem*'s ecological and relational frames, I argue that *taripato* as environmental care is a process of human action involving seeing, connecting, and nurturing. As an Ilocano, I associate it with the image of a tightly-knit family, anchored in the experience of the Ilocana woman as a strong and loving figure who guides her children toward their *pagsayaatan* (well-being; good). *Taripato*, as an exercise of ecological responsibility, entails taking care of oneself and the community as a whole. Caring for the environment fosters a connection with it, marked by a recognition of its life-giving power, much like children recognize their mother as their source of life and sustenance. *Taripato*

³⁶ Andres Carro 1888 *Vocabulario Ilocano-Español*, as translated from the original Spanish by Morice Vanoverbergh, *Iloko-English Dictionary* (Quezon City: CICM Missionaries Inc., 1956), 344.

³⁷ Gerard P. Gelade, *Ilokano-English Dictionary* (Quezon City: CICM Missionaries Inc., 1993), 674.

reflects the moral imperative to care for the environment not primarily because humans benefit from it, but because it is the foundation that gives meaning to one's identity and the community's way of life.

Seeing as an element of *taripato* involves not only asking, "Who am I?" or "Who am I becoming in the context of loving?" but also reflecting on, "How am I doing as a steward of nature?" *Nakem*, as an awareness of nature's value, necessitates self-reflection—a call to journey inward and see ourselves more clearly in relation to our connection with the environment.³⁸ As discussed earlier, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception highlights the role of full sensory engagement in shaping our awareness of the environment, making ecological responsibility more than just an intellectual exercise. By immersing ourselves in the lived experience of nature, we cultivate a deeper connection that fosters care and respect. Thus, awareness of the experience of caring for the environment requires facing oneself at the core of one's being, engaging the mind, heart, will, and entire person to offer a better and more profound response.

For the Ilocano, the connection of the person and the community to nature is inherently an ethical relation. *Taripato* as care arises from love and finds its ethical expression through *nakem* as a sense of moral and epistemic responsibility. In other words, I am aware that my life and that of my community are closely linked to our land, and so I must care for and enrich it in a way that ensures the sustainability of nature's gift for future generations. Viewed through the lens of *nakem*'s communal frame, *taripato* is understood as faithful love or *dungngo*—a love that transcends mere feelings and embodies a profound sense of duty as a moral response of gratitude to God whom the Ilocano recognizes as the

³⁸ Alterado, "Nakem ken Ulimek," 12-13.

generous giver of nature. The act of *taripato* serves as a tangible ethical manifestation of this love and responsibility, concretely reflecting the ethical dimension of *dungngo* within *nakem*.³⁹ When practiced in personal relationships—such as those between parents and children, within marriages, or among friends—or in communal relationships, such as public service, *dungngo* expressed through *taripato* conveys a deep commitment to the flourishing of the individual and the well-being of the community.

Taripato as care entails caring for the other in the sense of nurturing life (*biag*)—living not just to survive but to give someone a world through recognition, connection, and care as freely offered gifts. *Nakem* encapsulates the Ilocano sense of a good and virtuous life.⁴⁰ *Nanakem* is used to describe someone wise and responsible, “a person who is mature and responsible.” In this sense, *taripato* is an act of a person who is *nanakem*, caring for something or someone which reflects a commitment to live a good and flourishing life. Following the Ilocano perspective, ecological care and responsibility are practices of the wise person who profoundly understands one’s connection with nature. The co-existence between humans and non-humans, and their integral relationship, therefore, underscores the necessity of environmental care.⁴¹

³⁹Alterado, “Nakem ken Dungngo: An Ilokano Intimation of Love and Care,” in *Wisdom and Silence: Essays on Philippine Nakem Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Academy Press of Amsterdam, 2021), 108-109.

⁴⁰ Danilo S. Alterado, Godofredo G. Nebrija, Raul L. Villanueva, “Nakem and Virtue Ethics: Framing the Ilokano and Amianan Sense of Life,” *Humanities Diliman* 20, no.1 (2023): 23. <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/humanitiesdiliman/article/view/9122/8053>

⁴¹ Agcaoli, “Nakaparsuaan, Kadagaan, and Panaglunit ti Daga,” 6, 15-16.

Three potential counterarguments are discussed and addressed to demonstrate that *taripato*, as the Ilocano ethics of environmental care, is not only a deeply ecological, relational, and communal ethos but also an adaptable and actionable framework capable of addressing contemporary ecological challenges while honoring traditional values. This also highlights *taripato* as a human act of *nanakem a tao*, one that involves seeing, connecting, and nurturing.

One potential counterargument against *taripato* as the Ilocano framework for ecological responsibility is its perceived emphasis on human-centered care. Critics might argue that while it appears to include non-human beings as part of the ecological community, its focus on human flourishing and cultural sustainability risks reducing nature's value to its utility for humans. This anthropocentric perspective, they could claim, limits its ability to engage meaningfully with the broader ecological system or to recognize the intrinsic value of non-human life.

However, *taripato* is fundamentally ecocentric when examined through the fourfold frames of *nakem*. Similar to Leopold's land ethic, *taripato* expands human relationships to include the elements of nature, reflecting the Ilocano's deeply integrated worldview. The Ilocano cultural understanding of direction exemplifies this integration: *Amianan* (North) references the *amihan* or the northern breeze, *abagatan* (South) the *habagat* or southern wind, *daya* (East) the rays of the sun, and *laud* (West) the sea.⁴² This intimate relationship with nature extends to practical traditions, such as planting fruit trees or vegetables in every settlement and minimizing waste by repurposing items for continued use. Such

⁴² Alterado, "Nakem ken Ulimek," 18-19.

practices demonstrate an inherent respect for nature's cycles and resources.

Furthermore, *taripato* embodies the Ilocano religious frame, emphasizing gratitude and the mutual support between humans and nature. The Ilocano's frequent expression of thanks – “*Agyamankami Apo!*” – reflects their acknowledgment of nature as a divine gift with intrinsic value. The Ilocano sees oneself as part of nature, forming a relationship of mutual flourishing rather than domination. In this sense, *taripato* transcends human-centered care and aligns with the principles of integral ecology, affirming the interconnectedness of all beings and committing to the holistic well-being of the entire Creation.

Another counterargument is that *taripato*, as an expression of *dungngo* (love) and *nakem* (awareness of responsibility), might be seen as too abstract to effectively guide concrete, systematic ecological actions. While the ecological and relational frames of *nakem* may inspire *taripato* through *dungngo*, possible critics might argue that love alone lacks the urgency or practicality needed to address pressing environmental crises such as climate change or resource depletion. They might view *taripato* as a theoretical concept that falls short of providing actionable strategies for large-scale ecological challenges.

On the contrary, *taripato* as environmental care, flowing from *dungngo* in *nakem*, is far from being merely an emotional response. It is deeply rooted in tangible, responsible actions that embody respect for nature and shared ecological commitment, fueled by the desire to make a difference in the world.⁴³ A specific example of *taripato* in the Ilocano communities is the practice of *banata* (communal sharing of resources) which

⁴³ Alterado, “Nakem ken Dungngo,” 110-111.

demonstrates a profound sense of unity and connection.⁴⁴ For instance, a *bubón* (i.e., a well) located in a private farmland is typically accessible to the entire community, reflecting the belief that natural resources belong to everyone and should be shared for the common good. This unspoken practice reflects the community's shared meaning and collective identity, illustrating how *taripato* operates as a lived ethos within the communal and cultural frames.

Moreover, the sharing of resources through practices like *banata* nurtures the principle of *kinaaruba* (neighborly relations), which fosters harmonious relationships with both others and the natural world. This sense of community interconnectedness is not just symbolic but is actively practiced ensuring sustainability and mutual care.⁴⁵ By grounding ecological responsibility in concrete communal practices, *taripato* transcends abstraction and becomes a viable framework for addressing environmental challenges in a manner that is both practical and culturally resonant. This also contextualizes integral ecology in a local sense as *taripato* captures the element of action that is at once collective and personal.⁴⁶

Lastly, critics might argue that *taripato*, rooted in traditional Ilocano culture, underestimates the complexities of globalization and modern environmental challenges, such as industrialization and economic growth, which often prioritize development over sustainability. They might claim that it is insufficient to address the destructive practices and priorities of

⁴⁴ Alterado, "Nakem ken Ulimek," 18-19.

⁴⁵ Alterado, "Nakem ken Dungngo," 110-111.

⁴⁶ Francis, *Laudate Deum: Apostolic Exhortation On the Climate Crisis* (October 4, 2023), accessed from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

contemporary global systems. However, *taripato* remains relevant, as it embodies a sustainable interaction between humans and the natural world—one that reshapes the environment without causing harm or imbalance. Ilocano culture, shaped by hard work and frugality, fosters a deep sense of resourcefulness and care for possessions, promoting behaviors that align with long-term sustainability. This is evident in household practices like reducing waste, minimizing pollution, and prudent consumption, rooted in historical experiences of scarcity and economic hardship. By drawing on these values, *taripato* offers a culturally grounded yet adaptable framework for addressing modern environmental challenges.

Nakem's ecological and communal frames offer a dynamic framework adaptable to modern environmental challenges, such as climate change and urbanization, by emphasizing interdependence and shared responsibility. These frames align with global sustainability initiatives by encouraging collective action and fostering ecological stewardship. The Ilocano practice of *banata* can inspire urban and rural projects like community gardens, shared water systems, and renewable energy cooperatives. Similarly, the practice of *kinaaruba* as the ethos of being a neighbor supports the development of eco-friendly communities, integrating traditional practices like backyard farming into urban settings. In this sense, *taripato* transcends being merely an articulation of Ilocano identity; it also embodies the Ilocano approach to thinking globally while acting locally.

Furthermore, the concept of *taripato*, grounded in care and nurturing, enriches modern sustainable practices by fostering ethical stewardship and community-driven solutions. Its focus on protecting and preserving resources aligns with approaches such as the circular economy and renewable energy adoption. The

relational care inherent in *taripato* equips communities to resist the detrimental effects of global forces, including deforestation and resource exploitation, by promoting an ecological advocacy rooted in cultural values. *Taripato* as a framework of ecological responsibility, empowers communities to advocate for policies that prioritize ecological balance and cultural preservation while opposing harmful environmental practices. By harmonizing the wisdom of *taripato* with the sustainable development goals, communities can address global challenges while affirming their cultural identity and ecological heritage for future generations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the philosophical perspectives on ecological responsibility, highlighting that it is at once moral and epistemic, considering that beliefs and actions are causally related. The way we view nature influences the way we relate to it. If humans see it as something useful and profitable, then the relationship is utilitarian. If we see it as a home, we perceive it as integral to life; hence we care and protect it.

Pope Francis exhorts that a healthy ecology is a reflection of the dynamic and interdependent relationship between humans and nature.⁴⁷ By dwelling in nature, humans reshape it and in turn, nature provides the ground for culture to develop. Thus, from an Ilocano perspective, *taripato* frames ecological responsibility as the action of a wise person (i.e., *nanakem*) who understands the mutual interdependence between

⁴⁷ Francis, *Laudate Deum: Apostolic Exhortation On the Climate Crisis* (October 4, 2023), accessed from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

humans and nature. To care for the environment is to uphold our human culture and to constantly work for justice and human flourishing without destroying the environment.

Hence, environmental care or ecological responsibility, framed through *taripato*, must be transformative and liberating, promoting the holistic flourishing of individuals by fostering care and protection of nature. The transformative character of *taripato* as an act of a *nanakem a tao* extends beyond human relationships, encompassing the duty to nurture and safeguard non-human life. In this way, *taripato* as environmental care is inherently emancipatory, striving to cultivate a harmonious and flourishing existence for all beings. *Taripato* as environmental care emerges from a love rooted in rational convictions and oriented toward the good of the community. When this love is enacted through responsibility, it fosters not only the flourishing of the self but also the broader well-being of both human and non-human communities.

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Lévinasian Ethics of Responsibility: Conditions for a Peaceful Co-existence

Huong Mai Xuan Tran

Abstract: This paper intends to discover the significance of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas' perspective on human relationships, which he presents as an ethics of responsibility. We will illustrate its usefulness in contributing to an ethical peace over political peace. An ethics of responsibility is considered a pathway to promote human worthiness and create ethical peace. In each society, violence is maintained if there is still one person dominating others because of political, economic, and social status or racial and gender privilege. Lévinas proposes that relations with others should begin from the reverse instead of prioritizing ontology for ethics. For him, ethics is the priority when encountering others. This change in the paradigm of thought comes with a thorough re-examination of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Ethical Peace • Political Peace • Ethics of Responsibility • Freedom and Hospitality

Introduction

History refers to the events that have shaped every society, every community, and the world we live in; violence is interwoven into it. There seems to be no escape from violence because it is an observable feature of societal life. Does this mean that something good might result from accepting the unavoidable existence of violence in history? Counter-violence is justified, for example, to resist the ongoing unjust invasion of the Russian army into Ukraine. But what about the disaster it provokes? For Lévinas, the suffering and meaninglessness that evil inflicts could never be the last say. Humanity suffers from this evil because of the constant denial of duty and responsibility to care for others. As Lévinas writes, “the humanity of man is fraternal

solidarity with creation,” a “responsibility for everything and for all.”¹ In the meaninglessness of suffering, the sufferer evokes a call for help and compassion.

This paper analyses Emmanuel Lévinas’ ethics of responsibility and rethinks the possibility of mitigating worldwide political violence. It has three parts: (1) Lévinas’ perspective on political and ethical peace, (2) the twofold condition of the ethics of responsibility, and (3) Lévinasian ethical responsibility and its prospective peace.

Lévinas’ perspective on political and ethical peace

Usually, states and individuals construe peace through a set of sophisticated contracts and policies that ensure universal human rights and where obligations are respected. Such rights and obligations are legitimate because they are developed based on “a rational ontology that appeals to the universal essence of the human.”² However, justice and peace proceed from a convention of rights and treaties. In this case, the obligation to observe a peace treaty lies in the interests of the affected parties. Peace treaties serve various interests of the parties involved but are no guarantee for lasting justice and peace. From a Lévinasian perspective, a treaty merely suspends violence for some time. It lasts insofar as both parties adhere to the agreed-upon terms and conditions.

Lévinas warns,

Here you have the ubiquity and the omnitemporality of the violence which exterminates: there is no radical

¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, “Transcendence and Evil,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonse Lingis, 175-186 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 184-185.

² Catriona Hanley, “Lévinas on Peace and War,” *Athena: Filosofia Studijo* no. 2 (2006): 70-81.

difference between peace and war, between war and holocaust. Extermination has already begun during peacetime...Everywhere war and murder lie concealed, assassination lurks in every corner, killings go on on the sly.³

A peace concord is considered political peace because the rights and obligations imposed are created and guaranteed by politics between states. However, the notion of peace from a political standpoint could be problematic. In Lévinas' assessment, political peace does not recognize alterity and uniqueness. Instead, human beings are treated on similarity-sameness terms. Hence, their rights are encapsulated in the same category or policy for peace. Because policies for peace tend to be imposed across politically and identically treated groups, the chance of discriminating against others' perspectives or marginalizing other voices is great. Instead of safeguarding peace, an across-the-board politics might instigate further violence.

The war between Russia and Ukraine is a vivid example of an unguaranteed peace treaty. When waging war against Ukraine, President Putin justifies the invasion for Russian soldiers and domestic citizens, that is, to prevent genocide by Ukraine and protect innocent civilians. He justified himself in the position of just war tradition. Still, this justification is open to the abuse of that tradition because Ukraine is alleged to have committed genocide against Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Additionally, the Russia-Ukraine war has gone beyond the boundary of just war theory,⁴ causing

³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 192-193.

⁴ Peter Olsthoorn, "Fighting Justly: The Russia-Ukraine War and the Usefulness of Morality," in *Reflections on the Russia-Ukraine War*, edited by Maarten Rothman, Lonneke Pererkamp and Sebastiaan

vast “numbers of unintended civilian casualties” as well as “civilian infrastructure.”⁵ Indeed, the attack violates the norms of the just war and fails to protect civilians. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war prevails in two separate domains: the political decision to wage an unjust war and the sending of soldiers to fight justly. However, for Walzer the soldiers are unaccountable for what they fight but for how they fight.⁶ Although Russian soldiers are morally permissible to kill Ukrainian soldiers who defend their country, it is never just.⁷ And,

Rietjens, 385-396 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 389-391. According to Olsthoorn, the just war theory is abused by Russian President Putin. Regarding *Jus ad bellum* - the right to wage war, there is no justified reason to wage war between Russia and Ukraine. Concerning *Jus in bello* - the laws and ethics that warfare must consider, the Russian invasion caused Ukrainian casualties, even though the Russian side accused the Ukrainian military of shielding them with civilians.

⁵ Olsthoorn, “Fighting Justly: The Russia-Ukraine War and the Usefulness of Morality,” 390.

⁶ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), xi-xii. Walzer indicates that “no political leader can send soldiers into battle, asking them to risk their lives and to kill other people, without assuring that their cause is just – and that of their enemies unjust.”

⁷ Olsthoorn, “Fighting Justly: The Russia-Ukraine War and the Usefulness of Morality,” 392. Cf. the example of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defense Force, *Afghanistan Inquiry Report*. There are currently limitations on what soldiers can do when they are on duty. If they violate those limitations, such as deliberately killing civilians, they will be investigated and prosecuted, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan. Learning from the unjust war in Vietnam many years ago, Thomas Nagel states that “if the participation of the United States in the Indo-Chinese war is entirely wrong to begin with, then that engagement is incapable of providing a justification for any measures, taken in its pursuits – not only for the measures which are atrocities in every war, however just its aims.” Cf. Nagel, “War and Massacre,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1972): 123-144. The unjust war in Ukraine is also aggressive in the same manner; are the Russian soldiers aware of this unfair invasion?

of course, it was and still is wrong to inflict heavy casualties on the local population.

This aspect leads us to consider and evaluate the ethical motivation of soldiers and political leaders. Politics and morality hardly settle on each other. They seem to oppose each other because of the agenda that each one endorses. Lévinas is clear about this when he writes, “The art of war and of winning it by every means – politics – is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy is to naiveté.”⁸ In politics, ethics could be marginalized. Political compromises and negotiations are lifelines to settle conflicts and arrive at a politically driven peace accord, but they do not assure genuine peace. While decisions derived from compromises oblige the parties involved to uphold and hold on to those decisions, this seems possible only insofar as each party’s interest is upheld. Elsewhere, Hanley criticizes political peace when she writes, “The ontology of human rights does not provide grounds for true peace, because in each case I am excused from responsibility for you at the moment that I abandon my interest in you as a case of you as unique – other.”⁹ From this perspective, political peace is not only a means to protect one’s interest but also creates the possibility to buy some time before the subsequent explosion of violence appears.

The shift in thought and behavior does not have to advocate a religious or ideological persuasion. Lévinas remarks that religion or ideology does not seem to guarantee a person’s security from violence. Neither are they an indestructible refuge from violence. In contrast to what political peace advocates or religious and ideological persuasion do, Lévinas suggests the concept

⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 21.

⁹ Hanley, “Lévinas on Peace and War,” 74.

of 'ethical peace.' Ethical peace is construed when people and groups' unique and different experiences are respected. Ethical peace is a better alternative than political peace because of the primacy of the ethical challenge of alterity. Why is this so? Lévinas answers, "My wound, my suffering is not universal, but intimately particular."¹⁰ By implication, the ethical treatment of peace could more adequately redress my suffering rather than the application of a rational ontology that universalizes my suffering into a single set of policies.

Lévinas sees the relationship between two or more persons as an "asymmetry of intersubjectivity."¹¹ Such a relationship with others is unique and unassimilable. If this is what an ethical relationship is, as Lévinas suggests, a peaceful co-existence between agents should be grounded in something pre-political. Following Lévinas' thought, one could say that ethics precedes politics. Ethical peace is before any peace agreement (e.g., a contract) because it is "rooted in recognition of the radical difference of the other from me...[However] how we might get from the peace that preceded the political to peace within the political realm"¹² is a critical concern that begs an answer from a Lévinasian standpoint.

An ethical paradigm of peace is essential to the political discourse in shaping a new understanding of the political. It is not a peace "beyond the opposition between peace and war as ordinarily conceived,"¹³ which is calculated, meditated, and politically driven. Indeed, a politics of compromise could be disadvantageous to

¹⁰ Hanley, "Lévinas on Peace and War," 71.

¹¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, 103-121 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 107.

¹² Hanley, "Lévinas on Peace and War," 71.

¹³ Robert Bernasconi, "Different Styles of Eschatology: Derrida's Take on Lévinas' Political Messianism," *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 5.

relationships between groups. Some claims might be left unattended, and views that are different from those of a mainstream group would not be considered seriously. Moreover, a group with more robust social and economic bargaining power than others might confront or manipulate the creation of policies that would serve its interest. Because compromise is a political tool that tends to neglect weaker groups, a favorable and genuinely beneficial solution for all stakeholders is not forthcoming. Instead, it could result in the colonization of alterity and the imposition of a single perspective. Situations such as this could inflict injustice.

While policies and acts of lesser violence are significant steps that aim for justice, Lévinas registers that they fail to account for the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the neighbors because they lump differences together and treat and judge them through a single overarching standard. Treating differences this way could still result in violence. While the political step toward justice is necessary, it is not enough. According to Lévinas, the calling of responsibility emphasizes the “idea of justice” that grasps an ethical “response to the face of the other.”¹⁴ This ethical response stands beyond the possibility of knowledge.

When talking about justice, the ethical relationship takes precedence. The necessity of politics on the question of justice can be accepted if the socio-political institutions can be defined as the third party. For Lévinas, politics remains positive when the developments of social and political structures guarantee that the third party is inspired by a heteronomous responsibility of one to the other. The third-party must construct a just ‘co-existence,’ whereby everyone can

¹⁴ Joseph Cohen, “Introduction: Emmanuel Lévinas - From Philosophy to the Other,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 3 (2012): 317.

create relationships based on reasonable equality and fairness. It is precisely the beginning of sharing and social justice. However, in reality, no one can deny that the Russian government runs the risk of deteriorating because their tasks of guaranteeing justice for their people fail. Their failure to ensure justice renders a constant threat of structural violence and tyranny.¹⁵ Hence, justice without concern for the unique other can become rotten. This inevitably implies structural violence.¹⁶

In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas asserts that charity plays a vital role in leading and correcting the direction that justice takes. Thus, the absence of charity amongst institutions and politics of justice would hardly recognize the face of the other.¹⁷ There can never be a discussion of justice without the other. Lévinas alludes to the “commandment of saintliness” when speaking of justice tempered by charity. Such a commandment is pre-original in humanity’s existence. Hence, it is not something foreign to humanity who is, first and foremost, directed to this commandment. While Heidegger views the human person as someone who searches for the meaning of being, Lévinas thinks that a human being is called to a life of charity for the other.¹⁸

In his view, peace and justice are connected to eschatology. The connection is surprising because it

¹⁵ Roger Burggraeve, “The Other and Me: Interpersonal and Social Responsibility in Emmanuel Lévinas,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62, no. 2 (2006): 642.

¹⁶ Roger Burggraeve, “The Good and Its Shadow: The View of Lévinas on Human Rights as the Surpassing of Political Rationality,” *Human Rights Review* 6, no. 2 (2005): 84-86.

¹⁷ Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Lévinas,” in *The Provocation of Lévinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, 180-192 (London: Routledge, 1988), 181.

¹⁸ Wright, “The Paradox of Morality,” 180.

seems unrelated to human affairs. Yet, for Lévinas, eschatology is beyond totality, objectivity, and history. Thus, the notion of responsibility to construe peace and justice is sustained by eschatology. An eschatology of justice and peace does not pertain to the last things. It is an eschatology in the here and now that is simultaneously “beyond the totality or beyond history.”¹⁹ Lévinas clarifies, over and again, that eschatology “is not the last judgment that is decisive, but the judgment of all the instants in time, when the living is judged.”²⁰

In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas’ project of justice represents a link between the two aspects: being in the world “where everything possible is permitted”²¹ and being otherwise that is the responsibility I am obliged to take without obligation.²² Doing justice is directed to ‘being otherwise’ here and now. ‘Being otherwise’ withdraws from Heidegger’s ontological connotation of ‘being there’ and draws to a core of being as a matter of ‘being differently’ in the world.²³ ‘Being differently’ in the world can be understood as an incarnation here and not elsewhere, provoking my responsibility for the other. Such a responsibility opens the self to realizing justice in the here and now.

An ethical vision for peace and justice aligns well with Lévinas’ thesis on the ethics of responsibility for the other. Accordingly, ethical thinking is the original

¹⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²¹ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 6.

²² Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 13.

²³ Michael Purcell, “Is Theology Fundamental? The Scope and Limits of Doing Theology with Lévinas,” in *Responsibility, God and Society: Theological Ethics in Dialogue – Festschrift Roger Burggraeve*, eds. Johan De Tavernier, Joseph Selling, Johan Verstraeten, Paul Schotsmans, 123-142 (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2008), 126.

foundation of interpersonal relationships because one's responsibility for the other precedes any conception of ethnic boundary and egoism.

Two-fold conditions of the ethics of responsibility

In reading Lévinas, one can observe that freedom could be distinguished into “spontaneity”²⁴ and “ethical responsibility.”²⁵ The former identifies with the ability to objectify the other. At the same time, the latter is the ability to respond to the command or call of the singular other. The objectification of the other becomes manifest in utilitarian and Kantian ethical doctrines. From a utilitarian perspective, the value of something is measured according to its usefulness. In the Kantian context, the sovereignty of the subject lies in the determination of the self and the fulfillment of duty without regard for the circumstances or interests of the other. In both cases, the treatment of the other is grounded in a strategic calculation of “indifferent individualism”²⁶ and the “determination of the other by the same.”²⁷

²⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83; see also Deborah Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Lévinas on Relations to the Other* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

²⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, “Ethics and Infinity,” trans. Richard Cohen, *Cross Currents* 34, no. 2 (1984): 192.

²⁶ Annabel Herzog, *Lévinas's Politics* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2020), 11.

²⁷ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83. [In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, “the Same” refers to the self, or one's experience, consciousness, and existence. For Levinas, existence comes from the irreducible relationship between “the Same” and “the Other”, or the other person. – Ed.]

Responsibility as the recognition of freedom

Lévinas distances himself from these ethical doctrines. He lays out the foundation of his critique in *Totality and Infinity* to figure out how a non-oppositional relationship with the other becomes possible. It appears that this could occur when the Self ('I') regards the other, in the very first place, as someone who does not pose a threat to me; how I conceive the other influences my behavior, attitude, and perception toward them. This, in turn, becomes visible and ultimately felt by the other. To conceive the self toward responsibility as freedom is the possibility for an infinite ethical commitment to the other. Unlike utilitarians and Kantians, Lévinas claims that responding to the voice of the other has priority over the self. This claim does not mean one must neglect or deny oneself to reach out to the other. Instead, one should respond to outsiders in a non-cognitive and non-calculative manner. A non-cognitive treatment of the other is a counterpoint for both Kantians and utilitarians because the person frees oneself "from the enchantments to the self."²⁸

Ethical responsibility as freedom means that I am moved by the other. It is a movement that recognizes the singularity of the other who looks at me and to whom I respond accordingly. When "the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard."²⁹ The 'I' is deposed of its superimposing agential function and only moved by alterity, the absolute other. Nevertheless, if others command me to act according to their calls, does this not indicate they have power over me? If it is correct that the other controls me because they command me to act in a

²⁸ Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Lévinas on Relations to the Other*, 5.

²⁹ Lévinas, "Ethics and Infinity," 194.

certain way, how can I say that I am free? This view, however, misses the point. According to Lévinas, there is no determination between me and the other within the context of responsibility as freedom. The other, says Lévinas, questions my freedom and spontaneity and challenges me to act responsibly. The other is neither controlled nor determined by me. Instead, I am called to surpass its spontaneity to choose the other and become responsible for freedom. Lévinas calls this approach “an intentionality of a wholly different type”³⁰ or “intentionality of transcendence”³¹ because “it is a ‘vision’ without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision.”³² However, why should the vulnerability of the other move me, the exteriority, whose voice resists objectification? My responsibility for the other rests on fear: “Fear for the other, fear for the death of the other man is my fear, but it is in no way a fear for oneself,” he answers.³³ On the one hand, this means that I have the potential to negate or kill the other because of my spontaneous and arbitrary freedom. That is, I might cause his death. However, knowing fully well of the strong tendency for “violence and murder” that I “can bring about,”³⁴ I must heed his call, his suffering, on the other.

Departing from a Kantian formulation of universal respect anchored in the universality of a law, Lévinas explains, “To respect is to bow down not before the law, but before a being who commands a work from me.”³⁵ The other is someone, a singular and unique person who

³⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

³³ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 46.

³⁴ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 144.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

suffers, whose command I approach “not by appealing to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some juridical entity.”³⁶ I do not think Lévinas intends to downplay the importance of the universal law. For example, as far as global solidarity is concerned, universal law is essential in setting the stage for various states to work together to help victims of war regarding immigration, food supplies, etc. However, it seems that Lévinas has second thoughts about a universal moral law insofar as it tends to be legalistic, political, and calculative. For him, one could not strive for infinite responsibility if one’s movement results from calculation. Ethics lies in the concrete suffering and vulnerability I see and hear from this person who looks at me and calls me. Thus, I respond to this unique, concrete person, not an abstract juridical entity. Therefore, it goes to say that responsibility is stimulated by the other. Similarly, because I respond to others’ questions about my spontaneity, I become ethically responsible for the otherness of the other.

Freedom moves from knowledge (interiority or consciousness) to social relations (exteriority). Mature freedom, one attuned to an ethical commitment to the other, as opposed to arbitrary and spontaneous freedom, is the gateway to social interactions. Consistent with Lévinas’ opposition to a conception of freedom based on the determination of the other by the self, the goal of social relations is the recognition of the singularity of the other who is irreducible after our effort to conceptualize their presence.³⁷ The face-to-face encounter neither occurs in “cognitive reason” nor “aesthetic experience.”³⁸ In both instances, the other is reduced to an object that satisfies my need. In this case, social relations are not

³⁶ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 144.

³⁷ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 18.

³⁸ Herzog, *Lévinas’s Politics*, 1.

intended to fill in a selfish end. Thus, the self is required to understand social relations adequately.

The first understanding of social relations does not imply the sensibility of something. Put another way, it is not the experience of the “aesthetic” food. As I enjoy my food, “I make them my own. I transmute the other into the same.”³⁹ The food I eat becomes my nourishment, but the other is not someone to be transmuted by the self into itself. Nevertheless, what happens when the other is objectified for one’s enjoyment is that the former becomes “my own energy, my strength, me.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, the imperialism of the aesthetic is the antithesis of social relations. It is a very destructive relationship because the “imperialism of the same is the whole essence of [my arbitrary] freedom”⁴¹ that possesses, “suspends, postpones the unforeseeable future of the element – its independence, its being.”⁴² The objectification of the other takes place from enjoyment to objectification. Enjoyment is “anterior to the crystallization of consciousness, I and non-I, into subject and object.”⁴³ Lévinas describes this movement in that the “objectification operates in the gaze in a privileged way.”⁴⁴ It means that objectification grasps; the laboring hand “takes and comprehends”⁴⁵ the other to the same and “in its possessive grasp suspends the independence”⁴⁶ of the other.

The second reference to social relations from Lévinas’ perspective is not only about the consciousness of beings but also about the comprehension and objectification of something. By comprehending the other into an object,

³⁹ Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities*, 62.

⁴⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

one risks negating the other, constraining the possibility of a face-to-face encounter. As Lévinas says, “If freedom denotes the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other, knowledge, where an existent is given by interposition of impersonal Being, contains the ultimate sense of freedom.”⁴⁷ The ultimate freedom comes when I comprehend things that I come across with “master, dominate and dispose of”⁴⁸ them. I control, and thus, I am sovereign over and above what I comprehend. My spontaneous and arbitrary freedom increases because I master them.

Human beings can state the truth that we are equal. All of us “irreducible others who are utilizing [their] *our* face makes present ‘the infinity of the other.’”⁴⁹ Sociality enables the self to recognize the other as escaping categorization and conceptualization. As Lévinas clarifies, reason tends to know only itself. The “manifestation of freedom, neutralizing the other and encompassing” them,⁵⁰ is unsurprising if its analysis is primarily from the sovereign of reason. While reason tends to put the other into a concept according to its terms and to reduce it to the same, reason fails because knowledge or theory is designated in a relation. Lévinas states, “The knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without making it in any way whatever by this relation.”⁵¹ The knowing needs the known to manifest itself. Similarly, the ‘I’ needs the other

⁴⁷ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁹ Roger Burggraeve, “Fraternity, Equality, Freedom: On the Soul and the Extent of Our Responsibility,” in *Responsibility, God and Society: Theological Ethics in Dialogue – Festschrift Roger Burggraeve*, eds. Johan De Tavernier, Joseph Selling, Johan Verstraeten, Paul Schotsmans, 1-24 (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2008), 14.

⁵⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

⁵¹ Ibid., 42.

and vice versa to manifest its real being in the ethical relation.

Moreover, responsibility as freedom in this sense relates to recognizing the infinite alterity of the other. Insofar as reason tries to objectify the other into concepts or themes, it is unsuccessful. Lévinas identifies the movement toward the other as *respect*. The recognition of difference is “respect for exteriority” or “metaphysical desire.”⁵² Such a relation of respect does not take the other to fill in and satisfy my needs. Instead, it is beyond me and my needs. As Lévinas explains: “The metaphysical desire tends towards something else entirely, toward the absolutely other.”⁵³ The relationship of respect aspires to the infinite singularity of the other, which is “irreducible to the concept [it] constitutes in communicating [its] world.”⁵⁴ As a person like me, the other resists condemnation into an object of my reason. Sociality, then, as respect “does not cut the bonds a relation implies, yet ... these bonds do not unite the same and the other into a whole.”⁵⁵ The other maintains its independence, its singularity. The bond between the other and I is an authentic experience of freedom because I respond for the other whose calling succeeds in questioning “the exercise of the same.”⁵⁶

However, one might ask how encountering another person’s unique presence creates social relationships through language. The answer might be found in his words, “...to reach the other is realized in the relationship with the Other that is cast in the relation of language, where the essential is the interpellation, the vocative. The other is maintained and confirmed in his

⁵² Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him...; at the same time as grasped, wounded, outraged, he is ‘respected’.”⁵⁷ When I relate and speak to the other, s/he is ‘respected’. S/he is not a category I can comprehend, but s/he is the one I speak to.⁵⁸ However, what if I am to respond to the singularity of the other? Does this mean that the other determines me? Lévinas answers that it is in the respectful encounter of the other that my freedom develops. Freedom matures through sociality – in a relationship of respect for someone other than me. The foundation of the self is not in its dependence on itself but in its encounter with exteriority. Exteriority, however, also respects my singular independence. Lévinas thus asserts that the “foundation of the self” is not found “in itself” but “outside of heteronomous opinions.”⁵⁹

The concept of fraternity understands the self-identified from a heteronomous relationship. Following the Lévinasian ethics of responsibility-by-and-for-the-other as proximity, fraternity takes place when the ‘I’ is touched by the appeal of the other in their own account. The other touches me when one comes close to me yet remains infinitely separated. Fraternity is the proximity with the other without absorption or fusion because the appeal to the highest “non-indifference” is expressed in “the irreducible alterity of the other.”⁶⁰ By this ethical proximity, one can be present to one another nonviolently. We are close to each other even before I attune myself actively to the other knowingly and willingly. The ‘I’ is bound to the “ethical dynamism of being connected to the other and connecting oneself to the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁰ Burggraeve, “Fraternity, Equality, Freedom,” 3.

other.”⁶¹ In this ethical dynamism, each person remains a uniquely irreducible alterity.

Also, my relationship with the world is a sojourn – a continuous discovery of the self with the other. The world thus teaches me because it opens me to the other. With the world, I am no longer preoccupied with myself. Instead, I journey with the other toward the maturation of freedom and establishment of sociality. In this case, human freedom is a pre-original covenant that fulfills two aspects. First, freedom concerns a responsibility that does not rest on free choice. Instead, it concerns a freedom that, “thanks to the radical passivity of the ‘being linked with the other despite oneself,’ is relieved of its own weight and seriousness.”⁶² It entails that if I remain in myself as a free and conscious being, I will threaten my being by my freedom. On the contrary, if I am linked with the other despite myself, my own weight of existence is liberated and healed. Second, the freedom of being does not concern the free will that “can choose between two equally neutral possibilities.”⁶³ Yet, the freedom of response is animated, literally inspired, and oriented because it is raised above itself toward the other than itself. Thus, freedom is a response that one can choose to respond to the appeal of the other.

The maturation of freedom takes place in other-oriented directions. Mature freedom is the effort to go beyond oneself for the other. It is just like breaking the wall that separates one from another. The wall is the indifferent self that is only absorbed by its own interest. I can recognize what the others could teach me by breaking the wall. Teaching stimulates the passage from self-interestedness, control, and domination to other-interestedness and generosity. To receive the teaching of

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶² Burggraeve, “Fraternity, Equality, Freedom,” 8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 9.

the other, the self must abandon its sovereign subjectivity. Doing so, the self would be “enveloped by concern for the human fate.”⁶⁴ If this is correct, the interaction and cooperation of people in various areas of social life are likely to succeed. Moreover, the other-oriented view differentiates Lévinas from Kantian and utilitarian ethics. The former emphasizes the sovereignty of the individual. The latter underlines the usefulness of something for the greater good as the measure of its value. The differences in ethical doctrines allow us to appreciate the Lévinasian view on responsibility, particularly the disposition to welcome strangers. This brings us to the second understanding of the ethics of responsibility.

Responsibility as Hospitality

There are different ways to understand the notion of hospitality. From its etymological conception, hospitality comes from *hospitium* [Latin] and *hospes*, which means both ‘guest’, and ‘host’.⁶⁵ But *hospes* is drawn from the word *hostis*, which initially meant “to have power” for another. This power is described as “cordiality, friendliness, warmth, geniality.” The Latin word *hospes* produced such terms as ‘hospital’ or ‘inn’.⁶⁶ A hospital or an inn is primarily intended to assist people in recuperating from illness and rehabilitating a weak condition. This reminds people to be hospitable to guests. This probably gave birth to the idea of the right of a guest/stranger to a hospitable environment.

⁶⁴ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 112.

⁶⁵ John Koenig, “Hospitality,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/christianity-general/hospitality> [accessed December 6, 2024].

⁶⁶ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 149.

Hospitality thus has a double meaning. On the one side, it could mean a visitor, i.e., a stranger. On the other side, it refers to the host – someone who entertains, welcomes, and accommodates the stranger. In a host-visitor relationship, both parties are responsible. Insofar as the visitor is within the domain of the host, the latter is responsible for the welfare and security of the former. Similarly, the stranger conducts him/herself in a certain way, according to acceptable norms agreed upon. The individual is bound by the regulations accompanying their visit to a particular place. The relationship between a host and a stranger is motivated by reciprocal attention to each other. For example, in the business industry, reciprocity is determined by the agreement entered into by two contracting parties. However, reciprocity determines how much the host accommodates a visitor's/guest's needs. The business relationship is calculative: the host renders services, and the stranger pays for them. The host satisfies the stranger's needs but is tagged with a price. Lévinas' ethics of responsibility goes a step further: from reciprocity to infinite responsibility for the other. Hospitality is beyond reciprocity. Instead, it delivers "more passively than any passivity from links in a causal chain."⁶⁷ I oblige to the other's summon even before I concede to any agreement, "before being present to myself or returning to self."⁶⁸ Lévinas indicates hospitality as "the-one-for-the-other in the ego."⁶⁹

Similarly, I advocate an ethics of hospitality according to which a sense of generous disposition of *receptivity* and *sensitivity* to the stranger's needs is at play. That is different from a relationship based on economic reciprocity. In my view, a host treats and receives strangers with respect. Ties of a friendly

⁶⁷ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 79.

⁶⁸ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 149.

⁶⁹ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 79.

encounter bind the host. Of course, they can also be held responsible for the behaviors and actions of strangers whom they receive. Normally, amiable conduct is expected from the receiver and the stranger. Following Lévinas, I also think that the ethics of responsibility is non-calculative. Hence, expecting something from a stranger for the hospitable accommodation they received should be out of the picture.

Unlike a reciprocal relation that tends to get something in return for the services done, ethical responsibility is a commitment that involves no compensation. Nevertheless, why is infinite/absolute responsibility for the other so important? Why does one have to aspire beyond reciprocal relations? Is reciprocity not the order of the game to achieve economic wealth that could alleviate people's lives? Is it different from how society prospers and elevates living conditions? Reciprocity could safeguard people's equal interaction and footing. For Lévinas, a reciprocal relationship is inadequate to guarantee the place of ethics in socio-political relations because the relationship could become mechanical. Instead of giving freely – before any agreement – people interact with each other based on reciprocity. They tend to expect to get something in return for what they do. However, an infinite relationship of responsibility stresses a radically ethical commitment to the other before oneself.

The hospitable condition is revealed in the epiphany of the face. The epiphanic event displays a deep awareness of the other. For Lévinas, the other is the neighbour, “who is not necessarily kin, but who can be kin.”⁷⁰ Thus, an ethical other is not necessarily a diverse or different group identified by nationality or ethnicity.

⁷⁰ Benda Hofmeyr, “Lévinas and the Possibility of Dialogue with ‘Strangers’,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 47, no. 2 (2016): 176.

In fact, “the other is phenomenological, not categorical.”⁷¹ The face of the other is radical alterity that is both hard and vulnerable simultaneously. On the one hand, the alterity of the other is hard insofar as it presents itself to the other whose performance to the self is irreducible. It is hard because the self is in its attempt at being (*conatus essendi*) to substantiate in a continuous ‘struggle for life - by trial and error’. The appearance of the other in front of my existence “without my calling upon or having designed or conceived of the other beforehand”⁷² becomes a threat to me. However, the other is radically ‘heteronomous’ or ‘an absolute other’ to me. As a result, the self is never the law for others. Instead, the other imposes him/herself inescapably upon me as something that literally ‘overcomes’ me from elsewhere.⁷³ The heteronomy of the face is a strange and ethical event that flows directly from the alterity of the face.

On the other hand, the radical alterity of the other in their foreignness is also vulnerable. The other is a foreigner to myself who appears homeless because they do not belong to my organized world, so the other escapes from my providence or falls outside of it. This vulnerable

⁷¹ Lévinas, “Ethics and Politics,” in *The Lévinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989): 289-297.

⁷² Roger Burggraeve, “Affected by the face of the other. The Lévinasian movement from the exteriority to the interiority of the infinite,” *Dialegethai Rivista telematica di filosofia*, 10 (2009): 5.

⁷³ Burggraeve, “Affected by the face of the other,” 5. To say that I do not impose myself on the other is good for the other because I do not alter or transmute the other to myself. But what about the other way around? If I allow the other to impose her/himself upon me, would she/he not alter me? If I allow him/her to impose her/himself upon me, will he/she not act inhospitably upon me? Although the infinity of the other is the event of the subject’s de-centered call, the inter-subjectivity is in a “phenomenological description of multiple moments in which alterity meets the self and saturates one’s intuitive gaze.” Cf. Nigel Zimmermann, *Lévinas and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 27.

appearance tempts or invites me to ‘murder’ since the ‘I,’ in the first place, strives for the capacity to unfold the other. The vulnerability of the face challenges my longing for happiness since the ‘I’ tries to draw the other toward me and inflict upon them a violent act. This action, in other words, attempts to subjugate, subordinate, and reduce others into my system. That instrumentalizing reduction of the other is historically experienced in the imposition of brutal tyranny, terror, like Nazism. Such violence is also evident in the racially motivated treatment of one group to another in our contemporary times. Lévinas asserts that they are all forms of denying freedom to the other. In that sense, the other becomes vulnerable under the passion of denial, wanting to destroy the other. They become a scapegoat whom the ‘I’ blames for all of their problems and anxieties.⁷⁴ Based on that perception, the ‘I’ supposes that they can spontaneously discover the other through the appearance of the face – precisely through its countenance, character or personality, family, ethnic or cultural background.

The vulnerability of the other, for Lévinas, is precisely an ethical event that is an encounter with the other. Then, this ethical experience consists of an attempt of the ‘I’ that endeavours for either happiness or a dominating ability that can reduce, use, and consume the other as an instrument for one’s unfolding of existence. This results in a miserable appearance of the other. Burggraeve comments, “This is precisely the core of the ethical experience – at the very moment that the face tempts me in its poverty to grasp, manipulate or abuse it, I experience and feel that which may be possible is not allowed.”⁷⁵ Indeed, the epiphany of the face displays a paradoxical invitation. On one side, it is the attempt to murder, and the defencelessness of the naked

⁷⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199, 239.

⁷⁵ Burggraeve, “Affected by the face of the other,” 14.

face is another. This naked face presents itself to me as an appeal “not to kill”, which is a rejection of the act of violence. The appeal of the other is characterized by an unconditional obligation that stands open for the other and surpasses one’s selfishness.

Responsibility as hospitality is an ethical commitment to the call of the other who is forgotten and neglected in an indifferent sense. The rejection and neglect of the other constitute grave violence against human dignity. It is fundamentally a society’s betrayal of its responsibility. Lévinas’ view on hospitality intends to inject ethics into politics – the calculative treatment of the other. Politics supplemented by ethics draws institutions from calculative relations to social relations with the other regardless of social, economic, political, linguistic, and cultural affiliation. Responsibility as hospitality thus serves as a reminder to religious or secular institutions to realize ethics in the political domain, uncompromising the other to safeguard selected selves. Bringing ethics to politics is the rediscovery of the infinite commitment to welcome the stranger whose voice always summons the Self to heed. Unlike ethical responsibility as freedom and hospitality, a political relation “interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other person, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbor.”⁷⁶ In other words, politics lacks real freedom and hospitality – an all-embracing welcome of the other and respect for the other’s freedom. If this critique is correct, seeing anonymity and the absence of solidarity pervading the social domain is unsurprising. It seems, though, that Lévinas’ suggestion is also pie-in-the-sky and very demanding. His project – infinite ethical commitment – seems unrealizable.

⁷⁶ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150.

There still seems to be a long way to eradicate poverty, economic divide, inequality, gender discrimination, and unjust war, among others. But the advances made are seeds of hope for a better society. Seemingly, Lévinas' gigantic project is a real challenge to societies that are veering away from the politics of the same to the respect of alterity. Here, it probably challenges political leaders to infuse ethics into politics. Ethics could not allow the other to feel just a bit of mercy, compassion, and acceptance – the ingredients to establishing a peaceful environment. However, as I claimed in the beginning, Lévinasian ethics of responsibility emerges as a desirable prospect for every human being.

Lévinasian ethics of responsibility and its prospective peace

The two-fold conditions explained by Lévinasian ethics of responsibility are complementary to discovering a possibility for the peaceful co-existence of all human beings. The human development process reveals a three-stage scale. The first stage (1) is *il y a* - 'there is'. In this stage, one discovers an unclear distinction between the *self* and external factors. The *self* poses itself as a totality that cannot distinguish between what the *self* is and what is not. In this totality, being is considered as "universal and all-encompassing." The *self* is "an event of being which permeates and bears all beings." As such, it "comprises their unity."⁷⁷ Furthermore, the concept of '*il y a*' presents the *self* as an utterly indeterminable being-by-itself. It means that the *self* feels threatened by actions that depersonalize. In a philosophical language,

⁷⁷ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5.

it is called a “being-without-being.”⁷⁸ Thus, the self only becomes itself by arming itself with all its powers against that threat. It tries to establish itself under being such that it becomes ‘mine’, self-positioning, or self-establishing.⁷⁹ In doing so, the self refers to itself as a principle and origin of its own being.

The construction of the self leads to the second stage, called the *atheist stage* (2). Lévinas explains that this stage promotes freedom by reducing the other to the same. It is recognized through enjoyment. The self poses and enjoys itself as the lord and master of the world because the world is there for me. Hence, reducing the other as much as possible to the self is only feasible.⁸⁰ The subject thus tends to objectify others to their interests.

The third stage is a radical stage, which Lévinas identifies as the *metaphysical stage* (3) or social relation. To grow in this stage, one must stop seeing others as objects. It means that one engages with others without encapsulating the other into one’s own horizon, without reducing others to the same. Instead, this stage is a transcendent relation that welcomes the other as the other.⁸¹ Regarding human development, every person must reach the third stage, where the path to peace would be established.

On the political level, could political leaders, especially Russian politicians, reach the metaphysical stage? Since they cease at the atheist stage, they hold and alter others into themselves and treat them inferiorly. It results in exercising their political power to dominate others. Besides, how can Ukrainians be hospitable to

⁷⁸ Roger Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethics of Responsibility in Lévinas* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2009), 10.

⁷⁹ Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other*, 11.

⁸⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

Russians who cause pain and bitterness in their lives? There is never a simple answer to those questions. We can only hope that the Russians stop their unjust fighting. It is not a battle for justice but for testing weapons, such as drones, electronic attack systems, cyber weapons, and air-defense capacities, among others.⁸² It is undeniable that the destructive power of modern weapons is unimaginable. Nevertheless, these kinds of battlefields become the weakness of the Lévinasian approach since the face of the suffering people is no longer observed directly; their expressions of vulnerability may be unacknowledgeable for the political leaders because they are in their safe and hidden bases while sending orders to military personnel.

Pope Francis, in his letter to the Apostolic Nuncio to Russia after the one-thousand-day mark of the Russia-Ukraine war, expresses his laments for the prolonged war in Ukraine that has inflicted severe wounds on innocent beings bound to that battlefield. The pope writes, “I trust that the humanitarian efforts directed toward the most vulnerable may pave the way for renewed diplomatic efforts, necessary to halt the progression of the conflicts and to achieve the long-awaited peace.”⁸³ He reminds us that “the painful and prolonged duration of this war urgently challenges us, calling us to the duty of reflecting together on how to alleviate the sufferings of those affected and to rebuild

⁸² Martijn van der Vorm and Gijs Tuinman, “Lesson from Ukraine: Benchmark or Significant Exception?” in *Reflections on the Russia-Ukraine War*, eds. Maarten Rothman, Lonneke Peperkamp, Sebastiaan Rietjens, 476-513 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 482-483.

⁸³ Pope Francis, “Lettera Del Santo Padre Francesco Per L’anniversario Dei 1000 Giorni Della Guerra in Ucraina,” November 19, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/letters/2024/documents/20241119-lettera-nunzio-ucraina.html>, [accessed December 17, 2024].

peace.”⁸⁴ The vulnerable faces of others are manifest in the cry for their loved ones who died in war or the cry for their uncertain life caused by war conditions. Their cry must invoke peace rather than war, appeal to dialogue rather than the roar of weapons, reminding of fraternal solidarity over self-interest. The vulnerability of others revealed in their cry drives everyone to take responsibility freely and hospitably to rebuild peace as much as possible according to our capacities.

We are created in the original goodness of creation, which is retained in our essences but is changing our human weaknesses regarding human freedom without responsibility. Thus, the ethical responsibility is a step toward the original goodness of God, the Absolute Other. According to Lévinas, God becomes the third party. God comes to us through the face of the other.⁸⁵ Indeed, the question of God in the other is not merely comprehended by human knowledge. Still, the idea of God who lets the divine trace on the alterity of the face makes a connection to the ethical qualification by which the responsibility for the other begins. As Christians, more than fighting, we are invited not only to raise our voices for peace and justice but also to implore the gift of peace in our prayers and our commitment to contribute to the goodness of humanity.

⁸⁴ Salvatore Cernuzio, “Pope to Nuncio to Russia: War is a serious wound inflicted on human family,” December 14, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-12/pope-francis-letter-apostolic-nuncio-russia-war.html>, [accessed December 17, 2024].

⁸⁵ Lévinas states, “The other is closer to God than I.” Cf. Lévinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by A. Lingis (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Kluwer/Nijhoff, 1987), 56.

Conclusion

The explication of Lévinas' ethics of responsibility highlights the noble aim for ethical peace, starting with one's free and hospitable responsibility for others' well-being. When we talk about violence, we cannot but lament the rejection of the other because of the superior position of one person or one party over the other. However, it could also become the site of hope for justice and peace to prosper. Violence happens because of indifference, and Lévinas suggests that the infusion of ethics into politics could significantly transform politically calculated relations into ethically sound relations. The ethical relation is realized when societies give primacy to the ethical responsibility, which is not merely a one-moment of being touched by the other. Instead, it is an endless responsibility in which one desires prolonged goodness toward others. What constitutes an ethics of responsibility then lies in one's willingness to transcend oneself for the other.

The perspective of building peace should be considered by more than just politicians. Instead, inspired by Lévinasian ethics of responsibility, each person should acknowledge peace while trying not to deny, dominate, or transmute the other's uniqueness. Recent Catholic teachings invite the faithful to be attentive to the vulnerability of others in all aspects of life. The vulnerable faces of others, such as the migrants, the poor, the orphans, the elderly, the unlearned people, the marginalized, and even the natural ecology, invite us to take responsibility and protect them. As Lévinas indicates, the self cannot deny a radical call from the naked eye of the other. In doing so, the responsibility by and for the other also allows the able-response persons to contribute to goodness. This is a pivotal feature of any pastoral work.

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Should We Consider Transhumanism as Pelagianist?

Teofilo Giovan S. Pugeda III

Abstract: If the Christian theologian is to respond to the ethical risks of transhumanism, he or she may benefit from referring to the past for guidance. Is it a contemporary form of Pelagianism, the heresy commonly believed to have elevated free will to an unorthodox status? Particularly, how should one think of transhumanist efforts to bioenhance morality? In the present paper, I explore transhumanism, examine moral bioenhancement, discuss Pelagianism, compare and contrast transhumanism with Pelagianism, and discern some pastoral challenges of the Christian theologian vis-à-vis the preceding sections.

Keywords: Bioenhancement • Biotechnology • Morality • Pelagianism • Transhumanism

Introduction

What does it mean to be human? The question has elicited a variety of answers from philosophers and theologians for centuries. Yet, given current biotechnologies, there are those already anticipating what it means to be beyond human. Transhumanism is a broad movement encompassing the enhancement of human nature, eventually reaching a posthuman stage of existence. While largely theoretical, transhumanism challenges traditional notions of what it means to be human, among which is the Christian doctrine of the human person as a created being by God. For example, the intellectual thrust of transhumanism to bioenhance morality is seemingly at odds with the belief that the human person is dependent on God for moral perfection. At face value, moral bioenhancement appears to be a contemporary version of Pelagianism, the heresy commonly believed to have elevated free will to an un-

thodox status. In line with this, the transhumanist project risks distorting our understanding of morality by suggesting that it is entirely subject to our will. Nevertheless, giving the initial benefit of the doubt to transhumanism in general, I find dialogue between transhumanism and Christianity helpful for their mutual understanding. In what follows, I explore transhumanism, examine moral bioenhancement, discuss Pelagianism, compare and contrast transhumanism with Pelagianism, and discern some pastoral challenges of the Christian theologian vis-à-vis the preceding sections.

Transhumanism

Transhumanism, as we know it today, dates to the namesake 1957 essay of Julian Huxley, where he proposed that human beings can use technology to surpass biological limitations.¹ According to the creativity framework of transhumanism, Johann S. Ach and Birgit Beck state that human nature “– somewhat paradoxically – consists in having no (pre-given) nature or essence. On the contrary, human nature is precisely characterized by its openness and malleability.”² Prominent transhumanist Nick Bostrom further states that transhumanists tend to “view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways.”³ Corollary to this perspective is the belief that there is no moral obstacle to

¹ Julian Huxley, “Transhumanism,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 8, no.1 (1968): 73-76.

² Johann S. Ach and Birgit Beck, “Transhumanism and Moral Enhancement,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Human Enhancement*, eds. Fabrice Jotterand and Marcello Ienca (New York: Routledge, 2023), 270.

³ Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” 2003, accessed 11 March 2024, <https://nickbostrom.com/ethics/values>.

applying biotechnological interventions to modify human nature. Indeed, there is an imperative to actualize the fullest potential of human nature through enhancement. Why this is so can be gleaned from the fact that the progressive advancement of the medical field and biotechnologies has greatly improved human life. There are many examples of how we live in an age of life-improving research. Elon Musk, through his company Neuralink, announced the implantation of a brain-reading device into a human being with the long-term goal of allowing a severely paralyzed patient to control devices with thought alone.⁴ Genetic engineering is another interesting development. Not only might we genetically cure a disease in an individual, but also prevent a disease from transmitting to subsequent generations by altering the genetic makeup of gametes or an embryo. However, there could be unintended consequences down the generational line. A risk of transhumanism is that “we will never be able to anticipate the ultimate outcome.”⁵ One common thing to the previous examples is that they are therapeutic, but not all life-improving research could be limited to strictly therapeutic applications. In any case, current research provides a basis for transhumanist aspirations.

Underlying transhumanism is the natural scientific curiosity of human beings to explore the unknown. Unfortunately, science without ethics has proven to be a hazard to human society. Until the worldwide scientific community commits to a common ethical framework for transhumanism, there could be an accountability gap,

⁴ Reuters, “Neuralink’s first human patient able to control mouse through thinking, Musk says,” *Reuters*, accessed 22 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/neuralinks-first-human-patient-able-control-mouse-through-thinking-musk-says-2024-02-20/>.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “Transhumanism,” *Foreign Policy* 144 (2004), 42-43.

resulting in subpar research. But even if there were a common ethical framework, it might not necessarily align with the Christian vision of the human person. There are already ethical frameworks that diverge from Christian anthropology. Adding to the mix is that transhumanism is a transitory stage into posthumanism, an even vaguer concept. Like transhumanism, posthumanism is a broad movement that advocates for deconstructing the human person as an independent part of the environment; this contrasts with Cartesian dualism, which distinguishes the human from the animal.⁶ How posthumanism is possible is still speculative. Other concerns regarding transhumanism are the consumerist tendencies toward scientific research as strictly therapeutic applications may gradually become available to the public for elective purposes. Without adequate regulatory policies, much abuse is possible. Overall, transhumanism raises questions about what it means to be human and beyond.

Moral Bioenhancement

One notable question raised by transhumanism is: should we bioenhance morality? Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Arleen Salles point out the lack of a single definition of moral bioenhancement among proponents.⁷ For our purposes here, moral bioenhancement generally refers to any biomedical intervention for improving morality. Karolina Kudlek adds that the debate on moral bioenhancement “is insufficiently theoretically informed.

⁶ Jay David Bolter, “Posthumanism,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Klaus Bruhn Jensen, Robert T. Craig, Jefferson D. Pooley and Eric W. Rothenbuhler (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 1-8.

⁷ Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Arleen Salles, “Moral Bioenhancement: Much Ado About Nothing?” *Bioethics* 29, no. 4 (2015): 225.

It seems caught up in details of fictional scenarios and implementations and their outcomes, whereas there is still fundamental disagreement at the conceptual and normative level.”⁸ Let us course through representative perspectives on moral bioenhancement.

Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu argue that cognitive enhancement alone, whether through genetic intervention, pharmaceutical drugs, or stimulants, could lead to global catastrophic results (or ultimate harm) if left to individuals with questionable morals, like terrorists.⁹ Persson and Savulescu believe that if cognitive enhancement research were to continue, there must be commensurate efforts toward moral enhancement to avoid the misuse of knowledge. Yet traditional moral enhancement is a process that involves many factors, like education and socialization. Hence, Persson and Savulescu highlight the possibility of expediting safe and compulsory moral enhancement through biomedical means for altruistic (do unto others principle) and just ends to reduce the risk of global catastrophes. They do not, however, think that effective means for moral bioenhancement will be forthcoming soon but they note the scientific data leading to such and that any should complement traditional means, such as moral education.¹⁰ John Harris responds with two concerns: the apparent incompatibility between moral bioenhancement with human freedom and the seeming redundancy of moral enhancement given cognitive

⁸ Karolina Kudlek, “Towards a systematic evaluation of moral bioenhancement,” *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 43, nos. 2-3 (2022): 104.

⁹ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2008): 162-175.

¹⁰ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “The Duty to be Morally Enhanced,” *Topoi* 38, no. 1 (2019): 9-14.

enhancement, since he believes only rational capacities are morally relevant.¹¹ Persson and Savulescu address the first concern by stating that morally enhanced people would likely act in the same way as morally upright people now, but somehow more efficiently.¹² They then address the second concern with the point that knowledge of goodness is insufficient unless accompanied by a strong motivation that overpowers selfishness and other problematic attitudes.¹³ All in all, Persson and Savulescu cautiously propose moral bioenhancement to promote altruism and a sense of justice to mitigate or eliminate the growing risks of harm associated with modern scientific-technological progress, such as nuclear annihilation and overconsumption.¹⁴

Toward the other side of the issue, de Melo-Martin and Salles outline three central but flawed assumptions underlying discussions on moral bioenhancement.¹⁵ The first assumption is a tenuous view regarding the ease of changing morality. According to them, morality is not the same as motivation. The former is more difficult to change than the latter, which is situational. Even if one were to have a different motivation in a given situation, does that imply better morals overall? John R. Shook thinks that “only by presuming that increasing moral motivations guarantee some enhancement of moral

¹¹ John Harris, “Moral Enhancement and Freedom,” *Bioethics* 25, no. 2 (2011): 105.

¹² Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “Getting Moral Enhancement Right: The Desirability of Moral Bioenhancement,” *Bioethics* 27, no. 3 (2013): 128.

¹³ Persson and Savulescu, “Getting Moral Enhancement Right,” 130.

¹⁴ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “The Art of Misunderstanding Moral Bioenhancement,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2014): 48-57.

¹⁵ Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Arleen Salles, “Moral Bioenhancement: Much Ado About Nothing?”, 224-230.

conduct ... can enhancement of motives be taken as a reliable way to enhance morality.”¹⁶ Unless there is a greater appreciation of the multifactorial nature of morality, any single targeted approach would inevitably be deficient. Kudlek maintains that “[a] narrow focus on boosting specific moral capacities will not do the job entirely (e.g., increased empathy can lead us astray when it comes to making certain moral judgements)[.]”¹⁷ Yechiel Michael Barilan adds that “[s]uch enhancement of capacities may actually erode moral judgements and behavior, especially in unusually and complex circumstances.”¹⁸ The second assumption is a hyper-focus on individual moral deficits as the primary cause of moral evils. For de Mello-Martin and Salles, a broader view of reality reveals structural forces at work in propagating evil in the world. The third assumption is an ambiguous interpretation of scientific data. Biases and prejudices associated with moral deficiency may be rooted in anxiety, discomfort, or other things rather than outright hostility, with each one having corresponding factors behind it. With that in mind, where would we start moral bioenhancement? For her part, de Melo-Martin emphasizes the often-myopic approach of proposals for moral bioenhancement that does not consider the complexity of a person and his or her context.¹⁹ Tracy J. Trothen concludes: “Questions including how virtues are affected by context and by theoretical lens, must be

¹⁶ John R. Shook, “Neuroethics and the Possible Types of Moral Enhancement,” *AJOB Neuroscience* 3, no. 4 (2012): 5.

¹⁷ Kudlek, “Towards a systematic evaluation of moral bioenhancement,” 102.

¹⁸ Yechiel Michael Barilan, “Moral Enhancement, Gnosticism, and Some Philosophical Paradoxes,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 24, no.1 (2015): 80.

¹⁹ Inmaculada de Melo-Martin, “The Trouble With Moral Bioenhancement,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 83 (2018): 26.

probed and factored into the development and use of moral bioenhancements.”²⁰ As I understand their line of reasoning, if, for example, moral bioenhancement research and tests occurred in the Global North, it is suspect whether their results could easily apply in the Global South where cultures differently condition moral values. Such a conundrum does not appeal from decolonial and postcolonial perspectives.

The main contentions against moral bioenhancement tend to be practical. On that note, assuming researchers satisfyingly address the practical impediments, does that justify moral bioenhancement on a theological level? The perspectives thus far constitute a variety of disciplines ranging from scientific to philosophical. To better adjudicate transhumanism and moral bioenhancement, Christian theology is another helpful dialogue partner, especially with a large portion of the global population being Christian. Transhumanist efforts would impact many of them. Christian theology has dealt with a similar problem in the fifth century regarding the extent to which humankind can be moral. Let us now briefly review the controversy.

Pelagianism

The twenty-first century is far different from the fifth century, yet the inherent mysteries in theology ensure that some issues resonate down the centuries. One of which is the exact relationship between free will and divine grace. Is it possible for a human person to be without sin while on Earth? Christianity teaches that humankind, apart from Jesus Christ and (for Catholics, at least) Mary, inherited original sin from Adam and Eve;

²⁰ Tracy J. Trothen, “Moral Bioenhancement through An Intersectional Theo-Ethical Lens: Refocusing on Divine Image-Bearing and Interdependence,” *Religions* 8, no. 5 (2017): 4.

this is notwithstanding the debates regarding the hermeneutics of Genesis. Because of this, the answer to the given question would be negative. However, Pelagius and his associate Caelestius denied original sin and suggested that human free will allows the possibility of sinlessness. In terms of personal sin, he considered it not as a substance one transmits but as a quality discernible in individual actions.²¹ Augustine responded that sinlessness may be theoretically possible (bar original sin), but only with the active aid of divine grace. He wrote:

Whether it be possible for a man in this life to be without sin? I should allow the possibility, through the grace of God and the man's own free will; not doubting that the free will itself is ascribable to God's grace, in other words, to the gifts of God, not only as to its existence, but also as to its being good, that is, to its conversion to doing the commandments of God.²²

Specifically, he believed that sin could be avoided only through the merit of Jesus Christ, especially in the sacrament of baptism *ex opere operato*.²³ Thus, Augustine did agree with Pelagius that sinlessness could theoretically happen. What they diverged on was the means to realize it. Pelagius, after all, did not deny the reality of divine grace. Their disagreement ran in their understanding of divine grace. Pelagius believed in general grace initially endowed by God to humankind that cooperates with and is accepted by free will.

²¹ John Ferguson, *Pelagius* (Cambridge: W Hefner & Sons LTD, 1956), 160.

²² Augustine, "On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants," EWTN, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-merits-and-forgiveness-of-sins-and-on-the-baptism-of-infants-9101>.

²³ Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 160.

Augustine believed in special grace through Jesus Christ mediated by baptism independent of our free will. After 415 CE, Augustine took a stronger stance against Pelagius and his followers, describing them as *inimici gratiae* or enemies of grace. Later on, the Councils of Carthage and Ephesus formally condemned Pelagianism. According to Michael R. Rackett, due to the triumph of Augustinianism and its widespread influence, Pelagianism now connotes a negative stance on divine grace rather than the primary focus of Pelagius on the theoretical possibility of sinlessness.²⁴ Over time, Pelagianism fell out of vogue, even though Pelagius had positive moral contributions to Christian theology. Recent scholarship does try to rehabilitate Pelagius from his historical image. Thomas P. Scheck observes that “[a]n important result of the modern reappraisal of Pelagius’s theology has been a more sympathetic assessment of his theology and doctrine of grace and the recognition of its deep rootedness in the antecedent Greek theologians.”²⁵ He elaborates:

Pelagius’s doctrine of grace, free will, and predestination, as represented in his Commentary on Romans, has very strong links with Eastern (Greek) theology and, for the most part, these doctrines are no more reproachable than those of orthodox Greek theologians such as Origen and John Chrysostom, and of St. Jerome.²⁶

²⁴ Michael R. Rackett, “What’s Wrong with Pelagianism? Augustine and Jerome on the Dangers of Pelagians and his Followers,” *Augustinian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 235.

²⁵ Thomas P. Scheck, “Pelagius’s Interpretation of Romans,” in *A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steven Cartwright (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 80.

²⁶ Scheck, “Pelagius’s Interpretation of Romans,” 80.

Despite the apparent misconstruing of the full breadth of Pelagianism, does a sense of Pelagian optimism exist in transhumanism, notably in moral bioenhancement? The following section outlines the comparative bases for thinking there is as well as the contrasting nuances to keep in mind to maintain their distinctions.

Compare and Contrast

Referring to the experiences of the early Church to make sense of transhumanism is not unprecedented. Lee A. Johnson analyzes how the second-century Christological controversies shed light on transhumanism.²⁷ The background to his analysis is the transhumanist vision of a disembodied self where the body is either replaceable or absent. One transhumanist goal is to upload the mind of a human person into a digital computer to defy aging for cybernetic immortality. More than the plausibility of this goal, what does it say about how we understand ourselves? Johnson hears echoes of the corporeal controversies between the Gnostics and the early Church during the second century. The Gnostics treated the body as inferior to the spirit, and the early Church treated the body as imbued with sanctity due to the incarnation. The transhumanist exclusion of the body for the mind as the basis for personal identity resonates with the gnostic position of the spirit over the body. Jeffrey C. Pugh adds that “[w]hile not Gnostic in seeing the divine spirit within as the essence of human identity, transhumanism shares

²⁷ Lee Johnson, “Return of the Corporeal Battle: How Second-Century Christology Struggles Inform the Transhumanist Debate,” in *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, eds. Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trothen (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 273-290.

this eschatological vision—the end of all things leads to escaping the body.”²⁸ Barilan extends the Gnostic lens to moral enhancement. He finds similarities between Gnosticism and the position of Persson and Savulescu in that “there is a strong metaphysical dualism separating *cognitive* from *moral* faculties [*italics original*].”²⁹ He continues with: “In place of divine grace and salvific sacraments, they identify cutting-edge biotechnology, its ‘epistemological community’ and coterie of experts as humanity’s priesthood.”³⁰

Comparatively fewer authors touch upon Pelagianism in relation to transhumanism. Joel Thompson examines the presumptive attitude underlying it and transhumanism as they try to achieve perfection.³¹ He argues “The Pelagianism of transhumanists is seen in their assertion that human beings can create perfect bodies (including ones devoid of moral weakness) all on their own. It is therefore difficult to see what room if any is left for the continual assistance of divine grace.”³² Brent Waters adds that “Christian theology cannot embrace the transhumanist salvific strategy and eschatological horizon for reasons...similar to its earlier rejection of the Manichean and Pelagian heresies [in light of supposed human self-perfecting capabilities].”³³ Building on their preliminary insights,

²⁸ Jeffrey Pugh, “The Disappearing Human: Gnostic Dreams in a Transhumanist World,” *Religions* 8, no. 5 (2017): 1-10.

²⁹ Barilan, “Moral Enhancement, Gnosticism, and Some Philosophical Paradoxes,” 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Joel Thompson, “Transhumanism: How Far Is Too Far?” *The New Bioethics: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Biotechnology and the Body* 23, no. 2 (2017): 165-182.

³² Thompson, “Transhumanism: How Far Is Too Far?” 177.

³³ Brent Waters “Whose Salvation? Which Eschatology? Transhumanism and Christianity as Contending Salvific Religions,” in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of*

the crux of the comparative lens through which to view transhumanism and Pelagianism is what we aspire for here on Earth. For transhumanism, it is an ambiguous state of perfection, while for Pelagianism, it is a type of moral perfection. Hence, both aspire to some theoretical perfection. Yet, is any perfection, assuming it is possible here on Earth, even a legitimate aim? Jesus does mandate perfection in Matthew 5:48: So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect (NABRE). What do we do? Transhumanists may argue that, according to the theory of evolution, humankind is still evolving, albeit at a slow pace. Over the millennia, we have overcome various limitations, such as traveling on all fours. Today, there is no definitive direction in which evolution will take us. Hence, would it not be preferable to direct evolution and even speed it up? The transhumanist organization Humanity+ (formerly the World Transhumanist Association) proposes on its website:

The human is a biological animal, which evolved approximately 200,000 years ago as the subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens* (modern humans). The Western world's consensus on what is "normal" for a human biology, life span, intelligence and psychology established certain precedents. Outside these precedents would mean that a human is subnormal or beyond normal. A person who is afflicted with a physical affliction, a mental condition, or degenerative disease would be considered to be outside the normal range. Likewise, a person who has increased physiological performance or cognitive abilities, or lives beyond the human maximum lifespan of 122-123 years, would be considered outside the normal range. This

determination of “normal” has not kept up with the advances in technology or science.³⁴

Humanity+ acknowledges there are distinctions across the variety of human limitations we experience. Some are normal, like a healthy heart rate, while others are not, like a congenital heart defect. As per the excerpt, Humanity+ believes what is normal should update as technology and science progresses. Understandably, our idea of “normal” can tread on ableism without proper awareness. Still, the ability of the body and mind to act as an integrated whole should be the normative basis for deciding whether treatment is necessary. Transhumanism should carefully consider whether certain acts promote that integration or not. In the case of the latter, for example, one transhumanist aim is to overcome death or prolong life through either bodily changes or digital mind transfer. The psyche, however, may not handle the emotional turmoil of a stretched-out nostalgia for bygone years. What, then, would enhancement entail if the transhuman must struggle to find internal peace? Perhaps in the future, nostalgic memories, or anxiety for eternity for that matter, could be removed as one would a computer file. Yet, this would suppress one aspect of the human experience to enhance another. It would, thus, be a form of disintegration rather than integration.

While transhumanism does not explicitly deal with sin, there is parallelism in that sin is a human limitation, and some human limitations are attributed to sin, such as death in Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned” (NABRE). Hence, the quest for moral bioenhancement would find a similar spirit to the theoretical possibility of sinlessness

³⁴ Humanity+, “Our Mission,” accessed 11 March 2024, <https://www.humanityplus.org/about>.

in Pelagianism. Pelagianists are right in presenting sin as something to resist because it is not an original part of the divine plan for humankind. For Pelagianists, though, sin is only a matter of the free will of each individual. Divine grace is more of a supporting thing than a prerequisite for holiness. Death, furthermore, is not a consequence of the fall of humanity. If death were not the result of original sin, the crucifixion and resurrection would lose much of their theological significance. As it is, Pelagianism does not have a sufficient explanation for the evils found in the world, including death and suffering. Hence, the Church considers Pelagianism doctrinally unacceptable because it is incompatible with scripture and tradition, as traditionally interpreted by the magisterium with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, impossible to achieve sinlessness without divine grace, whether one acknowledges it or not. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith, and in sanctification through charity. God brings to completion in us what he has begun, “since he who completes his work by cooperating with our will began by working so that we might will it.”

Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life; it goes before us so that we may be called, and follows us so that we may be glorified; it goes before us so that we may live devoutly, and follows us so that we may always live

with God: for without him we can do nothing.³⁵

In short, transhumanism and Pelagianism offer tenuous promises of perfection. Ironically, the demands of effective personal integration and theological consistency condition their aims to overcome limitations. Be that as it may, their similarities are not to be overstated. As for their differences, whereas Pelagianism denies the fallen nature of humanity as a result of original sin, transhumanism appears to view human nature as, by default, “fallen” until enhanced. In a sense, human nature has basic goodness in Pelagianism but not in transhumanism. The source of this goodness is God, who is absent in most transhumanist discourse. Proceeding from this basic goodness is an inviolable dignity within each human person, regardless of physical or mental disorder. Pelagianism accepts that everyone has equal dignity. Without an objective foundation, like God, transhumanism risks being an unequal enterprise because enhancement may succumb to a consumerist mentality where having more is good. The problem is that not everyone can experience or may want enhancement. Their differences extend to their eschatology. Pelagianism believes that the *telos* of humankind is God, or, more precisely, unity with God in heaven. Transhumanism, meanwhile, is still in the process of determining what posthumanism would be like and if it is one thing. Some transhumanists believe that cybernetic immortality is the *telos* of human existence.³⁶ They are similar in their quest for immortality, but there is a crucial difference here. Pelagianism defines

³⁵ Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Vatican Archives*, sec. 2001, accessed 15 March 2024, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6Z.HTM.

³⁶ Mikael Leidenhag “Saved through Technology: Exploring the soteriology and eschatology of transhumanism,” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 11 (2020): 7.

immortality as a relationship with another, specifically God. Transhumanism, on the other hand, defines immortality primarily in deconstructive terms. It seems easier to state what we must overcome than become. By losing all sense of humanness, the posthuman would have lost what makes a relationship possible, which is individual personal identity. In short, transhumanism and Pelagianism do not have common ground regarding the basic goodness of human nature and the relational dimension of immortality.

Pastoral Challenges of the Christian Theologian

Considering everything, I argue that because God respects our free will, we should aim here on Earth to be perfect by being open to God perfecting us through divine grace. Not in a purely passive way, to be sure lest we succumb to quasi-Jansenism,³⁷ but our free will must aid us in becoming free recipients of the saving action of God. In our hyper-technocratic context, a sense of humility is necessary against the Pelagian optimism of transhumanism. As humankind progresses biotechnologically, there must be corresponding means for moral reflection that promote responsible biotechnology use. The Christian theologian must be aware of biotechnological developments because they are significant parts of “the signs of the times” today. Afterward, the Christian theologian should critically engage with transhumanism regarding these biotechnological developments to help direct them to ends compatible with Christian theological

³⁷ Jansenism was a heresy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries propagated by Cornelius Otto Jansen, who claimed to have rediscovered the teachings of Augustine. He stressed the fallen nature of humankind, denied the efficacy of human free will, and believed that God would save only certain people.

anthropology, according to which life is a gift from God. Thus:

To acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing, despite the effort we expend to develop and to exercise them. It is also to recognize that not everything in the world is open to whatever use we may desire or devise. Appreciating the gifted quality of life constrains the Promethean project and conduces to a certain humility.³⁸

The irony of biotechnology is that while it helps us develop the aspect of our *Imago Dei* that participates in the creativity of God, the misuse of it could lead us to lose sight of our being *Imago Dei* by attempting to appropriate divine prerogatives. What about the fact that some transhumanists do not believe in God? The concept of our being *Imago Dei* would be irrelevant to them. As Western society becomes more secular, the Christian theologian must be at the forefront of advocating for existential and moral reflection by initiating dialogue on what it means to be human. Is being human even something to transcend from? Since the transhuman would have more capabilities than a regular human person, it would be wise to remember the words of Jesus, “to whom much is given, much is expected (Luke 12:48).” The Christian theologian must ask if transhumanism would also allow us to sin in more sophisticated ways. For example, an enhanced mind capable of broader mathematical capabilities might lead to more financial anomalies if used by a greedy corporate employee. In such a scenario, biological and mental enhancement would enable one to fall even shorter of moral standards. Adam M. Willows

³⁸ Michael J Sandel, “The Case Against Perfection,” last modified April 2004, accessed 3 March 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/04/the-case-against-perfection/302927/>.

highlights the need for developing a sense of prudence when pursuing transhumanism.³⁹ Perhaps human limitations are valuable in providing the parameters for a meaningful life oriented toward salvation.

At the same time, Ronald Cole-Turner offers a counterbalance to the cautionary tone thus far. He suggests that transhumanism is “[a]t its core... authentically and essentially Christian.”⁴⁰ According to Cole-Turner, transformation beyond the human (or self-transcendence) is “the central promise of the gospel.”⁴¹ If the divine plan for humankind is to experience communion with God in eternity, two points that need further theological analyses are how biotechnologies can contribute to this divine plan and to what extent it would be morally acceptable.

Concerning transhumanist moral bioenhancement, it is unfortunate that we live in an imperfect world with pain, suffering, and death. Those with a skewed sense of morality inflict much of them on the self and others. If we enhance biological and mental attributes, does it follow that humankind would be morally better? Why wait and not just directly bioenhance morality by seeking biomedical interventions that reduce or eliminate tendencies toward evil? Yet, Ach and Beck point out that there is some dissent regarding which “morally relevant properties and capacities should be improved.”⁴² Simeon Zahl inquires:

³⁹ Adam M Willows, “Supplementing Virtue: The Case for a Limited Theological Transhumanism” *Theology and Science* 15, no. 2 (2017), 177-187.

⁴⁰ Ronald Cole-Turner, “Going beyond the Human: Christians and Other Transhumanists,” *Theology and Science* 13, no. 2 (2015): 151.

⁴¹ Cole-Turner, “Going beyond the Human: Christians and Other Transhumanists,” 151.

⁴² Johann S. Ach and Birgit Beck, “Transhumanism and Moral Enhancement,” 271.

Could Christians enhance their way out of the desire for another person's spouse that is talked about in the Ten Commandments and in the Sermon on the Mount? . . . Does this mean Christians will in principle be able to 'hack' the sin of adultery in the future, using technology to preclude it as a physiological and psychological possibility, if they so choose? . . . There is little question that the use of an effective antidepressant can in many cases significantly change, for example, the ability of a depressed parent to give their child loving attention . . . But if this is the case, does it mean that antidepressants are helping us, in a quite concrete way, to sin less, and to become more sanctified? To put it bluntly: are such enhancement technologies a kind of immanent means of grace?⁴³

Humankind indeed struggles to promote goodness in our imperfect world, but we must be cautious of resorting to any means to do so. King-Ho Leung contends that "*even if* technological enhancement can somehow make humanity 'sinless' or even attain some form of immortality, given that such 'unfallen' human nature would still require grace to attain to humanity's ultimate end which exceeds its natural capacity (*italics original*)."⁴⁴ Ted Peters adds that the transhumanist vision of idyllic existence "are naïve because they take insufficient account of the human propensity for using neutral things or even good things for selfish purposes, which results in chaos and suffering."⁴⁵ Moral

⁴³ Simeon Zahl, "Engineering Desire: Biotechnological Enhancement as Theological Problem," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 223.

⁴⁴ King-Ho Leung, "The Technologisation of Grace and Theology: Meta-theological Insights from Transhumanism," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33, no. 4 (2020): 486.

⁴⁵ Ted Peters, "Progress and Provolution: Will Transhumanism Leave Sin Behind?" in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 81.

bioenhancement at the theoretical level might not necessarily translate well to the practical level. A morally bioenhanced person may misjudge the proper implementation of moral values in a given situation. Moreover, from a psycho-spiritual perspective, a morally bioenhanced person risks succumbing to a heightened sense of scrupulosity, which could lead to long-term frustration and depression. For these reasons, the Christian theologian must ensure that holistic moral and psychological considerations are in the scope of moral bioenhancement.

A final word on social justice is worthwhile. Christianity teaches that we need divine grace for our betterment. One way we receive divine grace is through the experience of love. The Christian theologian can partly temper the Pelagian optimism of transhumanism by highlighting that what moral bioenhancement should lead to is solidarity with the least in society. Other than transcending humanness, we need to talk also about having a more grounded sense of humanness rooted and expressed in love for one another. Is this not the context of the mandate of Jesus for us to be perfect? There would be little to no progress with individual moral bioenhancement if unjust social structures and norms continue to oppress the marginalized and perpetuate other social injustices. If we want more to the human experience, let us remember the words of Athanasius, “[Jesus], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”⁴⁶ His kenotic acts of ministering to the poor and marginalized, undergoing the passion and dying by crucifixion for others are stark manifestations that solidarity sanctifies the human experience.

⁴⁶ Athanasius, “On the Incarnation,” EWTN, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-incarnation-12496>.

Conclusion

Transhumanism pushes Christianity to reaffirm doctrine on the createdness of humankind and clarify the necessities of moral life in the face of possible Pelagian optimism. I have shown that there are overlaps between transhumanism and Pelagianism as they do not fully align with magisterial teachings on human dependence on God for moral perfection. However, their eschatological visions differ in terms of relationality. In response, I advise the Christian theologian to engage with transhumanism in a spirit of dialogue rather than refute it outright. Regarding moral bioenhancement, I encourage the Christian theologian to uphold Christian moral values and the social-developmental aspects of moralization to ensure consistency with the calling of the human person to become more Christlike.

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Public Theology, the Common Good, and Planetary Community

Ted Peters

Abstract: A just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary community – that is a vision of earth’s future that pulls the public theologian forward, inspires the ecologist, and provides a norm for the ethicist. Post Vatican II Roman Catholics along with their Protestant confreres can learn from David Tracy’s delineation of three publics: church, academy, and culture. Accordingly, public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and addressed to the wider culture for the sake of the common good. In this explication of the tasks to be taken up by the public theologian, we will explore the necessity for envisioning a common good that is planetary in scope while attending to justice for individuals and communities at the local level.

Keywords: Common Good • Public Theology • Globalization • Global • Justice • Love • David Tracy • *Gaudium et Spes*

Introduction

There is no reasonable way to conceive of the common good as anything less than planetary in scope. Economic and ecological interdependence juxtaposed to rivalries and hostilities between nation-states make the present moment both opportune and perilous. How should a public theologian engage in worldview construction?

The futuristic landscape painted by the public theologian should depict Earth as a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary community. The ethical agenda begins with designating this destination and then mapping the roads that will take us there.

For some time now, I have been recommending that our spiritual and intellectual leaders construct a public theology that is pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political,

and prophetic.¹ Public theology should be *pastoral* by tendering considered answers to life's ultimate questions regarding meaning, death, and destiny. Public theology should be *apologetic* as well, in at least the limited sense that Christian commitments are rendered plausible, reasonable, and helpful. Public theology should engage the *sciences* in a mutually interactive way, ever cautious to keep theological concepts as consonant as possible with what science tells us about nature.² Public theology should be *political*, because it is the political arena where justice and the common good are publicly debated. Public theology can and should, finally, be *prophetic* because it measures today's world situation against the eschatological standard of the Kingdom of God. The prophetic public theologian announces God's promise of a new creation with a future justice that judges today's injustice.

In what follows I would like to examine the notion of the common good and then explore its planetwide implications. This will provide the coordinates for a public theology that is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and addressed to the wider culture for the sake of the common good.

¹ See: Ted Peters, *The Voice of Public Theology* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2023).

² There is no conflict between science and faith, according to Professor Wilson Angelo G. Espiritu at Ateneo de Manila University. "To acknowledge the reliability of scientific truths does not necessarily entail the abandonment of religious faith and vice versa." Wilson Angelo Espiritu, "Science and Faith Conflict: Fact or Fiction?" *MST Review* 19, no. 1 (2017) 98-116, at 98. Espiritu reinforces what we find in *Gaudium et spes*. "If methodical investigation within every branch of learning is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith." *Gaudium et spes*, §36.

Public Theology after *Gaudium et spes*

As the Second Vatican Council was winding down in 1965, it seems the Holy Spirit was just revving up our ecclesial engines with *Gaudium et spes*. This prescient document animated an already woke Church to expand the worship sanctuary to include all that is real, both sacred and secular. The health and flourishing of Planet Earth with all of its human inhabitants became a mission to be carried out by the disciples of Jesus along with non-Christians of good will. “The human family is gradually recognizing that it comprises a single world community and is making itself so.”³

Theologians of the church could – should? – depart their pulpits to stand behind university lecterns and speak through microphones in the public square. A new era of deliberate public theology had begun.

The nest from which fledgling public theologians were departing was feathered, of course, by *Gaudium et spes*. In addition, the influence of sockdolager Karl Rahner, made a direct impact on the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the political theology of Johann-Baptist Metz, the fundamental theology of David Tracy, and the public theology of David Hollenbach. “The main postconciliar theologies concerned with social life—liberation, political, and public theologies—share this Rahnerian paradigm but develop it by confronting theology with the particular conditions and circumstances of society,” Gonzalo Villagrán tells us.⁴

³ Vatican, *Gaudium et spes*, §33; https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴ Gonzalo Villagrán, S.J., “David Hollenbach’s Public Theology as a Reading of *Gaudium et spes*,” *Public Theology and the Global Common Good*, eds., Kevin Ahern, Meghan J. Clark, Kristin E. Heyer, and Laurie Johnston (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2016), 133-143, at 142.

By the 1980s David Tracy had stated what should have been obvious: “All theology is public discourse.”⁵ As reflection on faith, theology dare not limit itself to the private musings of clerics in the pulpit or seminarians in the pub. Theology by its very nature is openly shared, transparent, and available in the church, the university, and the wider society. “Theology is distinctive among the disciplines for speaking to and from three distinct publics: academy, church, and the general culture.”⁶ In brief, theology is public discourse on the implications of the faith which takes place where the entire world can overhear.

“Public theology,” according to post-colonialist Paul Chung, “is a theological-philosophical endeavor to provide a broader frame of reference to facilitate the responsibility of the church and theological ethics for social, political, economic, and cultural issues. It investigates public issues, developing conceptual clarity and providing social-ethical guidance of religious conviction and response to them.”⁷ For Chung, theological initiatives are reflected on philosophically and then addressed to the wider domain of interacting social forces.

The address to the wider culture may very well take on a prophetic tone. This, according to Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero in Brazil.

Theology, when in fact it is theology and not merely doctrine, has a public dimension that cannot be denied or hidden; it cannot be restricted to sanctuaries, nor to the new ‘holy of holies’ of the temples and their priesthoods. The privileged place of theology today is

⁵ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁷ Paul S. Chung, *Post Colonial Public Theology: Faith, Scientific Rationality, and Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene OR: Cascade, 2016), 1.

the public square; the place of the struggle for justice; the place of struggle for the humanity of human beings; the place of struggle for the ecological citizenship of all beings living on planet earth; the place of struggle for the freedom to be, as a counterpoint to the pseudo-freedom to have and to consume more and more.⁸

As prophetic, today's public theologian addresses the wider public with an eschatologically inspired vision of a future planet earth embracing social justice, ecological citizenship, and genuine freedom.⁹

The Common Good in Public Theology

"We need both a renewed understanding of the common good and a revitalized social commitment to it," writes Jesuit David Hollenbach.¹⁰ An indispensable component if not the leonine *locus* of the public theologian's constructed worldview should be the common good. The common good, according to *Gaudium et spes*, is "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate

⁸ Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero, "From the Sacristy to the Public Square: The Public Character of Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6 (2002): 56-69, at 56.

⁹ See: Ted Peters, "Public Theology: Its Pastoral, Apologetic, Scientific, Political, and Prophetic Tasks," *International Journal of Public Theology* 12, no.2 (2018): 153-177; <https://brill.com/abstract/journals/ijpt/12/1/ijpt.12.issue-1.xml>.

¹⁰ David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Chapter 8. "David Hollenbach is one of the main representatives of US Catholic public theology." Villagrán, 140.

aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.”¹¹

By no means is the common good the private possession of the Christian religion.¹² It is public. It is inclusive. It is global. And it is political. In his encyclical, *Pacem in terris*, Saint Pope John XXIII reminds us that “the attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities.”¹³ For the Vatican II pontiff, “every civil authority must strive to promote the common good in the interest of all, without favoring any individual citizen or category of citizen.”¹⁴ His predecessor Pope Leo XIII had also insisted: “The civil power must not be subservient to the advantage of any one individual, or of some few persons; inasmuch as it was established for the common good of all.”¹⁵ For the church to serve the world’s common good it must speak prophetically to the political domain.

The public theologian occasionally abandons the comfort zone of the chancel to stand on the soap box where a mixed crowd can get a good look at the church while listening to a civic message aimed at all. The public theologian risks acerbic responses from a pluralistic audience which may applaud, protest, interrupt, jeer, walk out, or fling verbal slurs.

We are all aware that soap boxes are out of date. What is today’s equivalent? Social media has replaced the

¹¹ *Gaudium et spes*, §26.

¹² “The common good consists of our shared values about what we owe one another as citizens who are bound together in the same society—the norms we voluntarily abide by, and the ideals we seek to achieve.” Robert Reich, *The Common Good* (New York: Vintage, 2018), 181.

¹³ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* §54; https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

soap box. Although electronic media unites our planetary society in a single global medium of exchange, the emerging noosphere does not enjoy the virtue of unity. Rather, dissentious forces blur lines between advertising and news, between alternative facts and factual facts, between reason and propaganda, between scam and charity, between ideology and religion.¹⁶ Whether we like it or not, this is the available public medium within which the public theologian can effectively exercise his or her or their craft. Culture and communication provide the public theologian with an opportune venue, factious though it may be.

One Planet, One Humanity, One Ecology

For the common good to be truly common, it must be sustainable and planetary in scope. In addition to including all of humanity, the common good must also include the other living creatures and natural systems that make earth a living entity. One planet. One humanity. One ecology.

But stretching the idea of the common good to planetary proportions has not always been easy. Let me trace a line of thought here.

In 1972 the Club of Rome forecasted multiple futures when asking their computer to employ a one world model. What would it take for earth to sustain its fecundity, its capacity to feed and nourish *Homo sapiens*? Multiple scenarios previewed the global interaction of nonrenewable natural resource depletion, industrial

¹⁶ “‘Post-truth’ is joined by ‘alternative facts’ and is fueled by ‘fake news’.” Jennifer Baldwin, “Forward,” *Navigating Post-Truth and Alternative Facts: Religion and Science as Political Theology*, ed., Jennifer Baldwin (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2018) xi-xviii, at xiii. In this context of global communications, perhaps the public theologian should don the clothes of the redoubtable person of integrity.

pollution, agricultural pollution, population growth, availability of food, and such. Even without factoring in climate change and global warming, the Club of Rome concluded that our planet cannot sustain a home for humanity if present trends continue. Clouds of disaster are fomenting on the horizon. Whether by famine or pollution, we can foresee massive diebacks of the human population. To ward off this disaster, we must solicit globe wide foresight cooperation, decision-making, and remedial action.¹⁷

The healing of the planet's ecosphere, added the Club of Rome, requires economic justice. The rich must help the poor. Economic justice is not merely an add on for liberal activists. It is integral to ecological balance. Taking control of earth's future requires new international economic policies which help the poorer countries develop the necessary social conditions that promote human fertility decline and pollution control.

Poverty pollutes. Pollution prevention is a luxury only the middle class can enjoy. Therefore, we cosmopolitan citizens must launch major programs to establish international food reserve programs, to expand small farm food production in the world's underdeveloped sectors and provide education to the level of literacy for

¹⁷ See: Donella Meadows, et al., *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972). "2022 marked the 50th anniversary of the Club of Rome's landmark report, 'The Limits to Growth'. This report – first published on 2 March 1972 – was the first to model our planet's interconnected systems and to make clear that if growth trends in population, industrialization, resource use and pollution continued unchanged, we would reach and then overshoot the carrying capacity of the Earth at some point in the next one hundred years. Some fifty years on, the call for a change in direction was more urgent than ever. The report's modelling was remarkably accurate and nuanced as the world declares the climate emergency to be real and global ecosystems to be at breaking point." Club of Rome website: <https://www.clubofrome.org/ltg50/> (accessed 4/21/2024).

all adults. In short, science and technology cannot save the planet without economic justice.¹⁸

Christian theologians in the 1970s largely ignored the Club of Rome and other ecological prophets promoting sustainability.¹⁹ Why? Because feminist theologians and Latin American liberation theologians objected to the planetary model. Feminists represented a specific constituency, women. And liberation theologians represented another specific constituency, the poor. So, progressive theologians of the period tailored their struggle to subversion, not cooperation.

Liberation theologians along with some political theologians believed they were in a struggle of 'we' versus 'them'. The 'them' included scientists and bureaucrats in Europe and the Americas who were white men. These white men, the liberation theologians complained, have exacted exploitative hegemony for centuries. So, liberation theologians kvetched that these white male European futurists and ecologists now want to take control of the whole planet and leave the structures of discrimination and marginalization in place. The nascent eco-theologians could not partner with other progressive colleagues at that crucial moment.

It was not until after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant meltdown on April 26, 1986, that feminist and

¹⁸ See: Ted Peters, *Futures—Human and Divine* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1978).

¹⁹ One clear exception is process theologian John Cobb, Jr., who with foresight championed both the liberation agenda and the common good agenda. See two prescient co-authored books. First, Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and second, Herman E. Daly and John Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). "The human economy needs to be shaped with the health of the biosphere in view" *Ibid.*, 202.

other liberation theologians put planetary sustainability on their agendas. The radioactive cloud wafting above Chernobyl in Ukraine rode the stratosphere like a sky horse across eastern Asia, across the Pacific Ocean, across North America, and then back across the Atlantic to Europe. Full circle. No longer could any reasonable person deny that a planetary nexus of relationships keeps every human being in community with one another. The 1979 World Future Society slogan finally took cultural traction: “Think Globally. Act Locally.”

Even though Christian theologians were initially slow to embrace the planetary model, the wider culture has in the twenty-first century adopted a workable worldview for framing ecological and justice concerns, namely, the concept of the Anthropocene. In *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity*, the Club of Rome recognizes the Anthropocene, according to which “scientists acknowledge that the dominant driver of change within the Earth system is now a single species: *Homo sapiens*, us.”²⁰ If we are honest, we can no longer think of the responsibility of the human race as anything less than global in scope. The common good is planetary.

A half century after the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, and after the Club of Rome introduced the planetary model, Christians and Muslims have boarded the public theology train. In 2015 Pope Francis proposed “an integral ecology” which is “inseparable from the notion of the common good” in §156 of his sterling document, *Laudato Si’*.²¹ In 2024 a cooperative group of Muslim organizations including the Islamic Foundation

²⁰ Sandrine Dixson-Declève, Owen Gaffney, Jayati Ghosh, Jorgen Randers, Johan Rockström, and Per Espen Stoknes, *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity* (Gabriola Island BC: New Society Publishers, 2022) 13-14.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (2015) http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

for Ecology and Environmental Sciences constructed a second sterling commitment to caring for Earth. “*Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*, aims to demonstrate how Islam can be a driving force for sustainable development and environmental care.”²²

A planetary common good would make forceful sense to Roman Catholic systematic theologian Anne Clifford. “A theology of creation that earth can live with calls for commitment to solidarity with humans and earth’s other-kind and to all-encompassing global common good.”²³

The Oppressive Risks of Globalization

Feminist and other liberation theologians had good reason to be cautious about the planetary vision of future oriented eco-theologians.

On the one hand, today’s eco-theologians rightly recognize the need for the common good to be planetary in scope. Long time feminist eco-theologian Sallie McFague became inclusive in the way *Gaudium et spes* is similarly inclusive. “The environmental crisis we face—and which is epitomized by climate change—is a planetary agenda, involving all people, all areas of expertise, and all religions.”²⁴

On the other hand, globalization risks putting up “no exit” signs for the poor and putting CO₂ up to pollute

²² Othman Llewellyn, Fazlun Khalid, et al., *Al-Mizan: Covenant for the Earth*. The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (Birmingham, UK, 2024); [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/file:///C:/Users/Ted/OneDrive/My%20Course%20Readings/Al%20Mizan%20\(English\).pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/file:///C:/Users/Ted/OneDrive/My%20Course%20Readings/Al%20Mizan%20(English).pdf) (accessed 4/28/2014).

²³ Anne Clifford, “Creation,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, eds. Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2nd ed., 2011), 201-253, at 249.

²⁴ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 84.

everyone's atmosphere. Why? Because the superstructure of existing global organizations is built foundationally on disregard for economic justice and disregard for the planet's ecological health.²⁵

The rivalry and even hostility between nation-states prevents political attempts to establish a just world peace. The political vacuum gets filled economically by the imposition of order enforced by international corporations. According to Lutheran eco-theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, the economic structures we take for granted are responsible for structural violence against the poor and against the planet. Structural injustice is what a theologian would call *sin*.

Structural violence, declares Moe-Lobeda, "refers to the physical, psychological, and spiritual harm that certain groups of people experience as a result of unequal distribution of power and privilege."²⁶ That unequal power and privilege is held in place by the octopus arms of international corporate interests. "Neoliberal globalization, by concentrating wealth into the hands of a few enormous global corporations, also has concentrated their power for structural sin."²⁷ Moe-

²⁵ "The consequences of climate change affect the poor and the marginalised disproportionately and harshly, especially in the short term. In the long run, the future of the planet becomes endangered. This fact has been highlighted in recent years by grassroots activists and empathetic thinkers who care not solely for themselves and their pleasures but also for the lives and livelihoods of other less fortunate humans. Happily, this campaign has had some effect. An awareness has crept into people that climate change is a threat to each living being on this planet." Jacob Thomas, "Climate Change and the Poor," *Pax Lumina* 3, no.1 (2022): 6-7, at 6; [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://paxlumina.com/download/Jan-2022.pdf](https://paxlumina.com/download/Jan-2022.pdf) (accessed 4/22/2024).

²⁶ Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2013), 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

Lobeda lifts up a vision of a new world in which the sin of structural violence has been negated.

Imagine a world in which global investment firms, mortgage markets, and other globally operating corporations do not have the freedom to pursue self-interest regardless of the cost to millions of human beings and their homes, jobs, health, food, and water supplies, and communities. The goal of curtailing unaccountable corporate power intends to bring that image into the realm of the real.²⁸

Sustainability and justice. A planetary common good includes both. We might even call it *ecojustice*, “where the earth itself receives justice because the rights of all living things are granted and protected.”²⁹

The Cosmic Common Good, the Local, and the Glocal

We can see how public theology can be and should be global. Might it also be cosmic in scope? After all, our sun does not stand alone. While our sun provides Earth with the energy our planet needs for creative advance, the sun could not be what it is without its own contextual interaction with the Milky Way Galaxy. And the Milky Way shares a history if not a future with one trillion if not two trillion other galaxies. God’s creation does not stop with Earth. Should our ethics stop with Earth?

²⁸ Ibid., 271.

²⁹ Alan G. Padgett and Kiara A. Jorgenson, “Introduction,” *Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 1-13, at 7. Mary Evelyn Tucker puts it this way: “Without a healthy natural ecology there is not a sustainable economy and vice versa.” Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Climate Change Brings Moral Change,” *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato Si’*, eds., John B. Cobb, Jr., and Ignacio Castuera (Anoka MN: Process Century Press, 2015), 187-189, at 188.

Not according to astrotheologian John Hart of Boston University. Humanity on Earth should prepare now for increased interaction with life in outer space. Extraterrestrial life will come in two forms: earthlings traveling to off-Earth sites plus meeting extraterrestrial intelligences who have undergone a second genesis. Hart dazzles before the ethicist the lure of a cosmic commons.

Cosmographically, humanity will come to be at home not only on Earth but on diverse worlds among the stars and in different dimensions. In all places, people would come to share with other intelligent beings, congenially and collaboratively, common places in cosmos communities in the integral cosmos commons.³⁰

Eco-ethics will soon become cosmic ethics. In the meantime, back on Earth our immediate task is to raise the local human mind to a level where it can perceive and own global human responsibility.

But our heliotropic focus on the global need not blind us to the local. Existential questions along with human plight occur at the local level, within one or another local context. Australian theologian and editor of the *International Journal of Public Theology*, Clive Pearson, employs the illuminating term, *glocal*. This term, *glocal*, demonstrates the public theologian's responsibility to both. "The prospect of a public theology is polycentric; it is neither monocentric nor univocal."³¹ It is global, local, and glocal.

A global emphasis without a local emphasis risks perpetuation of current injustices. Globalization has garnered negative connotations for "having negative

³⁰ John Hart, *Third Displacement: Cosmobiology, Cosmolocality, and Cosmoecology* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 246.

³¹ Clive Pearson, "The Quest for a Global Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology* 1, no.2 (2007): 151-172, at 161.

impact...unjust exclusion of the poor countries from influence on powerful economic forces.”³² In our postcolonial period we dare not forget the glocal.

Karl Gaspar, CSsR, a former Academic Dean of the St. Alphonsus Theological and Mission Institute in Davao City, does not forget the local.

Thus, our ancestors lived in peaceful co-existence with Mother Nature. But Colonization cum Christianity destroyed this cultural-belief matrix which began our people's alienation from nature as their conversion to Christianity made them susceptible to accepting the mode of production of feudalism. And when the American colonizers took over, it was easy to shift to the mode of capitalism which as we know today is what *Laudato Si'* has severely critiqued. By giving up on our indigenous belief system, embracing the Western way of life (from Christianity to capitalism), it was just a matter of time before our forests would be destroyed, our lands would be converted to plantations, logging and mining would become buzz words for economic investments. And look who are suffering – all of us Filipinos, and in a special way the indigenous communities.³³

Global, local, and glocal together make up the scope of the public theologian's vision of a just, sustainable, participatory and even planetary community.

Ferdinand D. Dagmang, who teaches at Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, and Maryhill School of Theology, emphasizes the glocal at home in the Philippines. “Vatican II's influence is made concrete through the Basic Christian Communities whose formation has become the standard approach to Church

³² Hollenbach, *Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Chapter 8.

³³ Karl Gaspar, “Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa: 500 years since Christianity arrived in our islands,” *MST Review* 23, no. 2 (2021): 119-133, at 133.

renewal in many parishes in the Philippines.”³⁴ Where we find the poor and the marginalized, we find the place for the church as community. In short, the glocal includes a “theology of the people” (*teología del pueblo*).

Here, I think, the public theologian can benefit from the Roman Catholic principle of subsidiarity. The *principle of subsidiarity*, according to Manhattan College public theologian Kevin Ahern, “invites society to be structured so that decisions are made at the lowest levels when possible and the highest levels when necessary.”³⁵ The public theologian should be attuned to both the local and the global as well as all levels of social organization in between. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reminds us that “the principle of subsidiarity ... grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society, while also demanding a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power.”³⁶

³⁴ Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “From Vatican II to PCP to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a State of Mind to a New State of Affairs,” *MST Review* 18, no. 2 (2016): 33-62, at 59-60. The Philippine glocal requires urgent attention. “Meanwhile at the ground level, the situation of our indigenous peoples continues to worsen especially in those contested territories where corporate interests protected by the State apparatus including its main agency, namely the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and the military continue to push their agenda at the expense of both the lives of our IPs but also the integrity of creation.... So unlike countries like Australia, where the State has manifested some sense of goodwill to respond to the demands of IPs, in this country the State moves in the opposite direction!” Gaspar, op.cit., 124, 126.

³⁵ Kevin Ahern, “Mediating the Global Common Good,” *Public Theology and the Global Common Good: The Contribution of David Hollenbach*, eds., Kevin Ahern, Meghan Clark, Kristin Heyer, and Laurie Johnston (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2016) 30-50, at 40.

³⁶ *Laudato Si'*, §196. Fordham’s Thomas Massaro has high praise for the pontiff. “Pope Francis advances global reconciliation by examining four features of the pope’s advocacy for peace—a distinctive approach that combines symbolic gestures, bold actions, and insightful written and spoken words. These four include: 1) his efforts

It is reciprocal. It takes individuals in local communities to contribute to the common good. The common good, in return, blesses the individual. Herman Daly and John Cobb recognize the reciprocity. “The well-being of a community as a whole is constitutive of each person’s welfare.”³⁷

Love, Power, and Justice for the Planetary Common Good

The destination we envision is a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary community. How do we get there? Let’s start with love.

But what about justice? We have been contending that the very concept of the common good requires a planetary and even an ecological scope. We have also acknowledged that what today counts as globalization incarcerates marginalized people in poverty and loss of access to the goods the common good offers. The public theologian’s response is to pursue justice. Of course.

Nevertheless, let us now ask: is bare justice what the public theologian should demand of the world order? In the last century, theologian Paul Tillich intertwined love, power, and justice. Tillich noted that “love adds something to justice that justice cannot do by itself.”³⁸ To address our world’s plurality of cultures, multiple nation-

at forging diplomatic solutions to conflicts; 2) his pastoral visits to many countries; 3) his publishing of many insightful documents; and 4) his use of a structural analysis to inform his judgments regarding peace.... Francis has positioned the Roman Catholic Church to develop into an even more effective agent of peace and also a more promising partner for peace than previous popes.” Thomas Massaro, “Pope Francis: Renewing Roman Catholic Approaches to Peace,” *MST Review* 24, no. 2 (2022): 96-130, at 99.

³⁷ Daly and Cobb, *op. cit.*, 164.

³⁸ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1960), 13.

states, and rival vested interests, the Christian public theologian will need to be motivated by love. It is because we love that we pursue justice for so many in the world we may never even meet.

Our planetary community needs a self-understanding that it is in fact a community. An intentional community cannot be constructed without a blueprint drawn in love.

At present, we are estranged from one another at the level of individuals, local communities, races, nations, and political ideologies. We are even estranged from the biosphere which sustains our life. “Love is the drive towards unity of the separated the reunion of the estranged,” adds Tillich.³⁹ The task of the public theologian is nothing less than one of overcoming division, competition, and estrangement with love.

“Love that seeks justice is the counterpoint of structural evil,” contends Moe-Lobeda.⁴⁰ Raw justice unleavened by love yields only social flatbread. The love enriched public theologian is better off following the model of Jesus, as Helen Romero reminds us. “On the cross Jesus conquers the evil force that seeks to annihilate what is good in this world. His act of sacrifice reveals what holds both his human and divine natures together: love.”⁴¹

How about a glocal application of Jesus’ love that leads to ecojustice? Rather than working within a strict stewardship framework, Jeane C. Peracullo and Rosa Bella M. Quindoza proffer an ethic of ecological care that relies upon three local Filipino principles: “Ecological care’s dimensions of *pagtutulungan* (service to one another), *pakikiisa* (solidarity), and *pananampalataya*

³⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁰ Moe-Lobeda, op. cit., xviii.

⁴¹ Helen Romero, “Doing Political Theology in the Time of Violence: Unmasking Violence with René Girard and Walter Wink,” *MST Review* 20, no. 1 (2018): 121-150, at 140.

(faith).⁴² What we gain from this ecological care garden is a trellis within a fertile worldview on which practical proposals can climb.⁴³

Such love counters sin. The public theologian employs discourse clarification to display the ways in which the structures of environmental degradation and economic injustice are products of human sin. Sin is almost universally accompanied by self-justificatory rhetoric. In our situation self-justification accompanied by scapegoating is publicly disseminated in the form of alternative truths, false facts, and disinformation. Like the prophets of ancient Israel, today's public theologian should render clarification, judgment, and truth.

This is by no means a consequentialist ethic. Rather, the public theologian embodies moral integrity imbued by love in hope that such love will be contagious and spread throughout the planetary community.

Conclusion

We began with a futuristic vision of a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary community. Such a vision of earth's future provides the public theologian with a destination. What is now needed is an ethical GPS to map the road to get there.

To guide us? That is the vocation of the public theologian. Post-Vatican II Rahnerian David Tracy draws three publics to our attention: church, academy, and culture. Accordingly, public theology should be conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the

⁴² Jeane C. Peracullo and Rosa Bella M. Quindoza, "The Environmental Activism of a Filipino Catholic Faith Community: Re-Imagining Ecological Care for the Flourishing of All," *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022) 1-15, at 13; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010056>.

⁴³ See: Ted Peters, "Public Theology, Discourse Clarification, and Worldview Construction," *Theology and Science* 19, no. 1 (2021) 1-4; DOI.org/10.1080/14746700.2020.1869672.

academy, and addressed to the wider culture for the sake of the common good. This article's thesis is that the common good must be thought of as planetary in scope while attending to justice for individuals and communities at the local level.

For more than half a century, scientists have prophetically proclaimed: our planet is in peril. Are the ears of our public theologians open to hearing the warning? Are the mouths of our public theologians open to speaking words of judgment and encouragement? Are the hearts of our public theologians open to loving earth's inhabitants creatively all the way into a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary community?

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Book Review

Toward a Bai Theology: Catholic Feminism in the Philippines. Edited by Virginia Fabella, MM and Agnes M. Brazal. Quezon City: Claretian Communications, 2023. Pp.x +273.

On May 27-29, 2011, thirty Filipina feminists, who before had been working separately, gathered together in Tagaytay City both to celebrate the gains of feminism in the Philippines and to share their concerns about growing fundamentalism, which would threaten to turn back the hands of time and move back whatever advances already made. This volume is the outcome of the gathering. For some reasons which would be unnecessary to elaborate, it took more than ten years after the gathering before a published collection of articles came out. But it is worth the wait. Any serious student not only of feminist theology in particular but also women's studies in general should have this book on their shelves.

There are many Filipino Catholics who have become so at home with patriarchal structures that they immediately view feminism as a manifestation of evil influences making inroads into our pristine faith. I am not sure whether these Catholics would be open enough even to read this book, or whether they would change their minds if ever they read it. Indeed, even among some women committed to gender issues, there is some reservation with the use of the word *feminism* because of its association with the West. Thus, this book is an attempt to show that feminism is not the result of ideological colonization and is consistent with our Catholic faith.

The book is divided into five parts. The first part discusses some historical antecedents of modern feminism in the Philippines. One important highlight of

this part is the presence of *babaylanes*, who made up one of the pillars of ancient society and were predominantly women. Foremost of the functions of a *babaylan* would be to bring the concerns of the people to the spirits. Although suppressed by the Spanish colonizers (oftentimes brutally, as narrated by other sources), the *babaylanes* adapted some aspects of Catholicism to their ancient customs. I personally would like to know more about the connection between the *babaylan* and the later *beaterias*. Other highlights of this section are indigenous spirituality where men and women would have equal footing, the use of feminine metaphors to address God, and the presence of priestess in a religion called Ciudad Mistica de Dios in Mt. Banahaw. The latter religious group continues to exist to this day.

The second part deals with the contribution of Filipinas in the socio-political transformation. This section includes, but is not limited to, participation of women in the struggle for national liberation. Many of these feminists had their awakening during the dark days of Marcosian rule but their advocacies continue to these days, even if the causes they are fighting for have evolved.

The third part deals with the story of consciousness-raising among the women religious. The process of conscientization met some barriers from the male-dominated church and from some women religious themselves because of stereotypes of what feminism is.

Feminism in educational institutions is treated in the fourth part. Included in this section is the slow but steady inroads of gender studies in the academe, and a comparative study of how different theological schools treat feminism in their respective curricula.

Feminism in the Philippines does not mean a conscious refusal to appropriate methodological approaches and even conceptual categories from other

countries. This is evident in the fifth part. For instance, the essay on feminist biblical spirituality is indeed rooted in the Philippine setting, most especially in the context of biblical reflections with communities of poor people. But to challenge the people to go beyond a dualistic mindset with which the Bible has been interpreted for them for generations, it is necessary to appropriate hermeneutical approaches that originated mostly in the Western academic milieu. The theological essay on sexuality as *pangangatawan* profoundly roots its discussion on the analysis of vernacular words. But this analysis would presuppose knowledge of the discourse on theological anthropology in the West. Furthermore, it would serve not only for its own sake but also as a critic of the traditional worldview of sexuality, as recently propounded most notably by John Paul II. The last essay also compares, albeit briefly, the different methodological approaches of the three leading feminist theologians today. This essay notes that these theologians, all receiving advanced theological training in foreign universities, would appropriate liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics, even if we can also discern some differences in their methods. This last essay seriously engages with Pope Francis' ambivalence toward gender issues. On the one hand, if we compare him with his predecessors, the current Pope is most open to feminist and LGBTQ+ issues and has taken a stand. But on the other hand, he also issues statements that would reduce feminism as part of ideological colonization.

The book ends with an epilogue that synthesizes all the essays. The distinctive features are again elaborated: *babaylan*, indigenous spirituality, nationalist struggles, etc. Before it ends, it addresses the issue of naming. If the term *feminism* carries some unnecessary baggage and is too Western and bourgeois for comfort, what is the alternative word? These female theologians

came up with *Bai* theology. This nomenclature is clever since *bai* is the root of *babae*. (If I have some reservations, it is that for some strange reasons which for now I cannot explain, *bai* is actually how male Cebuano speakers call each other. I am wondering whether there is any etymological connection between *babae* and *bai* as used by Cebuano males.)

I end my review with two suggestions: First, the *beaterias* deserve more than just a passing mention. *Bai* theologians who specialize in the (her)story of Philippine church can study this past phenomenon more seriously. Second, one must be careful in essentializing feminism in the Philippines. Just like many ideas, it is also evolving.

Ramon D. Echica

Book Review

Fritz, Maureena. *Redeeming Jesus' Name: Reflections of a Ninety-Year Old Nun Living in Jerusalem*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003. 155 pp. + ix.

As the title of this book states, *Redeeming Jesus' Name* is the memoir of a nun with long experience of living and working in Israel. Maureena Fritz is a Sister of Sion, a Catholic religious order dedicated to fostering Christian-Jewish relations. She is also a Professor Emerita of St. Michael's College, Toronto, whose theological studies led her to Jerusalem, where she came face to face with Judaism and the reality of Christian anti-Semitism. Subsequently, she founded the Bat Kol Institute in Jerusalem, which in different forms has offered Christians the opportunity to study the Bible using Jewish sources in a Jewish setting. Now 98, Sister Maureena cares passionately about Christian-Jewish relations, and has made the education of Christians about the violence against Jews committed in the name of Jesus the Jew her life's work. As someone who has participated in three Bat Kol programs, I can attest to the great value of the Institute's offerings.

The book is composed of seven chapters, which weave Sr. Maureena's personal reflections together with her scholarly knowledge of the Bible, Judaism and Christian history. Chapter 1, entitled "Interpretation: God's Word is Not Frozen in the Past," introduces both Talmudic Rabbinic methods of interpretation and Christian traditions of interpretation which hold that the meaning of scripture is not univocal or frozen in the past, but part of ongoing divine revelation. The chapter concludes, however, by questioning the official Catholic position that divine truth (especially with respect to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity) rests

definitively in certain authoritative Catholic teachings—a doctrine shared, in varying forms, by many Christian denominations.

Chapter 2, “God Speaks to Us in the Events of Our Lives”, begins with Sr. Maureena’s personal search for the voice of God in the wake of the Shoah. To approach this question, she considers the stories of a variety of biblical figures: Eve, Abraham, Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, David, and Moses. These characters have in common the experience of hearing God speaking to them within the context of their everyday lives. This includes the author’s own experience of remembering with horror “the number of times I applied to all Jews statements about Jews found in the Gospels” like John 8:44: “You [Jews] are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires” (p. 35). How, she asks, can Christian faith be reformulated in the wake of centuries of institutionalized anti-Judaism?

The title of Chapter 3, “My Encounter with Ecclesia and Synagoga,” refers to an image found in some medieval Christian churches, where the church and the synagogue are depicted as two women, one triumphant over the other (see pp. xiv, 53). Sr. Maureena interweaves her own encounter with the Jewishness of Jesus, on the one hand, and the history of Christian anti-Judaism, on the other, as a Sister of Sion. This began in 1978, when she was on sabbatical in Jerusalem, where she met Holocaust survivors who flinched at the sight of a crucifix. At the Ratisbonne Center of Jewish studies for Christians, she was introduced to the long history of the Christian persecution of Jews. Sr. Maureena provides a brief review of this history, beginning with the origins of the church as a Jewish sect, the era of the Crusades, the Counter-Reformation, and the post-enlightenment emancipation and assimilation of Jews into European

society, which swerved disastrously into racial anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust. This summary is followed by a discussion of *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (1965), a ground-breaking document from Vatican II, which emphasized “God’s special love for the Jewish people; and condemns hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism at any time and by anyone” (p. 47). It is during the Council that the mission of the Sisters of Zion underwent a significant transformation from praying for the conversion of the Jews to the pursuit of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Sr. Maureena provides a fascinating insight into the significant role of the Sisters of Zion in the writing of *Nostra Aetate*, and in pressuring the bishops to support the document (p. 49). However, the chapter ends on the sad note that the roots of anti-Judaism run so deep in the church that even *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent statements on Christian-Jewish relations retain the virus of supersessionism—the teaching that the fulness of divine revelation is found *only* in Christianity.

Chapter 4 (“Replacement Theology in Paul and the Gospels”) is the longest chapter in the book, and, as the title states, argues that core NT writings are the source of the replacement theology (supersessionism)—the notion that Christianity “replaces” Judaism—that pervades Christianity. Using both evidence from the Book of Acts and Paul’s letters, Sr. Maureena concedes that although Paul saw himself as a faithful Jew, he nonetheless rejected the law (the Jewish way of life) as a thing of the past, and regretted the fact that the majority of Jews did not accept Jesus as Messiah. She agrees with James Dunn that Paul is ultimately responsible for “the parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, she finds expressions of replacement theology in the four Gospels, especially in John, concluding with

the question of what to do with a “revelation of God” that “calls for the demonization of an entire people” (p. 87). She goes on to astutely point out the continuation of replacement theology and supersessionism in *Nostra Aetate* and, especially in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document on *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures* (2002). These documents, she notes, express genuine concern to remedy past wrongs done to the Jewish people while remaining grounded in a theology “that understands Christianity as the fulfillment, and therefore the replacement, of the ‘Old Testament’—a theology that identifies the Jews as ‘disobedient’ to God’s will for them” (p. 91).

The next chapter (Chapter 5: “Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?”) also concerns scriptural interpretation. It begins with a list of Jewish writers (Joseph Klausner, Jules Isaac, Martin Buber, David Flusser, Amy-Jill Levine, Marc Chagall) who have appreciated Jesus as a faithful Jew. Next, Sr. Maureena sifts through Pauline and Gospel passages (e.g., Mark 15:39; Luke 1:28-35; John 1:1-14; Col 1:15-17) to show that references which have long been interpreted as referring to the divinity of Christ can be construed metaphorically as statements of God’s revelation *in* Jesus’ words and deeds rather than as ontological expressions of Jesus *as* divine. The author recommends a Spirit Christology that focuses on the empowerment of the human Jesus by the Holy Spirit, an experience open to all human beings, rather than a literal reading of John’s Logos Christology.

In the final two chapters (Chapter 6: “Who is Jesus for Me?” and Chapter 7: “Who is God for Me?”), Sr. Maureena reflects personally on the significance of Jesus and his mother Mary. Her Mariology is highly influenced by Jane Schaberg’s *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (New York: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), and will be challenging for

many readers to consider. Her Christology of Jesus as “godlike” but not God, as a prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of God, but who did not claim to be God, while grounded in the earlier chapters, will likewise evoke strong reactions in some readers. Sr. Maureena describes her relationship with God in terms of betrothal (“falling in love with God”), the Sabbath (which she observes in imitation of Jesus), and *teshuvah* (repentance, expressed through mending relationships with the Jewish people). In the postscript, “Looking Ahead”, she reflects on what she calls as “pluralistic Christology” that recognizes that Jesus belongs to everyone, “as we believe the Buddha, for example, belongs to everyone” (p. 149).

By way of discussion, since I am a NT scholar, I will focus here about where I agree—and disagree—with Sr. Maureena’s discussion of Paul and the Gospels. While it is true to say that the Christian scriptures have been used to promote anti-Jewish attitudes throughout history, to frame them in terms of supersessionism and replacement theology—the idea that Christianity “replaces” Judaism—is an overstatement, in the sense that when these documents were written, they were not scripture—they were occasional writings meant for the edification of small, marginal, sectarian groups scattered throughout the Roman empire. There was no such thing as “Christianity” (the word “Christian” only appears 3X in the NT [Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16], as a nickname that outsiders use to refer to them)—but tiny communities in a variety of situations and with different beliefs and practices. Some were of Jewish ethnicity, some were Gentile, some mixed. All of them shared the belief that the end of history was imminent, and that a new, utopian age would be decisively established, i.e., they had a vivid expectation of the kingdom of God. They had no idea that a religion called “Christianity” would arise, or that their “scriptures” (if they knew them) would

be used to persecute Jews (or anyone else).

With respect to the Gospels, I'm not as sure as Sr. Maureena that they are devoid of declarations of Jesus' divinity, although admittedly the few can be interpreted in different ways. For example, when, in a passage not considered in the book, Thomas exclaims "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), this can be read as directed to God (not Jesus), or to Jesus (my Lord) and God (my God), but the most natural interpretation is that, as Adele Reinhartz holds, it's an affirmation of the high Christology of John's Prologue (see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 194). Whether it began in the first century or the fourth, Christians began to see Jesus as divine at some point. The deeper question suggested by Sr. Maureena is, what would Jesus as a *first-century Jewish prophet ministering to other Jews* think of such an idea?

That said, insofar as the NT has often been (and continues to be) read through a supersessionist lens and has been used to uphold replacement theology, Sr. Maureena's book is a strong reminder that Christians need to exercise caution and discretion when they read these documents. To end with a quote from one of the Jewish scholars cited in the book: "After two thousand years of ignorance, the time has come for church and synagogue, Jews and Christians, to understand our intertwined histories, to see Jesus as a Jew who made sense to other Jews in a Jewish context, to learn how our two traditions came to a parting of the ways, to recognize how misunderstandings of Jesus and Judaism continue even today to foster negative stereotypes and feed hate, and to explore how the gains in interfaith relations made over the past several decades can be nurtured and expanded" (Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*:

The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus [New York: HarperCollins, 16).

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