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Valuing Water with Gratitude and Restraint

A Catholic Theological Imperative

Jame Schaefer

An overview of some patristic and medieval theological teachings on water and other goods of creation provides key perspectives on our valuing and our use of them.

Water . . . Evolving life-forms crawled out of it hundreds of millions of years ago:

- It enveloped our fetal state, like other mammals.
- It suffuses every tissue of our bodies, constituting 70 percent of our total weight.
- It quenches the thirst of humans, other animals, and plants.
- It serves as a means through which we cook our food and cleanse our bodies.
- It surrounds our drifting continents and forms streams, rivers, lakes, and seas.
- It rises into the atmosphere and falls back to the land and seas, moderating the global climate and providing invaluable services to the diverse ecological systems that comprise our planet.

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- It provides countless recreational opportunities for us, stimulates our aesthetic senses, feeds our economies, and plays vital roles in our religious rituals.

As believers in a purposeful creator and sustainer of the universe, we must value all forms of water both intrinsically (for its own sake) and instrumentally (for its usefulness to humans and other species). Reasons for valuing water in these two basic ways are found in the Catholic theological tradition, especially among patristic and medieval theologians. They also provide some fundamental directions for demonstrating our valuing by giving gratitude to God, restraining our consumption of water, and assuring sufficient water supplies for the poor and vulnerable. Showing that we value water is especially imperative because the rate of consumption by some humans is accelerating while one-sixth of the world's population has access to approximately one gallon of life-sustaining water per day (Sterling, 29–30; Dey and Dutta).

Valuing Water Intrinsically

The theological basis for valuing water beyond its direct usefulness to humans is its goodness. According to the Priestly redactor of Genesis 1, all created entities are “good.” Each has a unique identity with a God-given purpose to fulfill that is essential to the orderly functioning of the world. Furthermore, God affirmed the totality of related inanimate and animate entities as “very good.” At least implicitly, we can conclude from this account that humans (*imago Dei*) should value what God values.

For centuries thereafter, theologians have reflected on the goodness of all natural entities. As Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) wrote in the fifth century, “Just as all that is good comes from him, so from him comes all that has natural existence, since all that has natural existence is good. Every nature is good, and every good thing is from God” (*De Natura Boni* 19). Each is a natural good that exists because God willed it to exist, sustains its existence, and values its existing to achieve its God-given purpose.

Saint Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274 CE) systematically emphasized the intrinsic goodness of the natural world. He elaborated that each natural good is perfect in some innate way that was implanted in it by God, and each is endowed with an innate way of existing and/or acting to achieve its purpose (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.38–40). Informed by new translations of the Aristotelian corpus, Aquinas understood water as a primary element of the natural world that is valuable in itself in its various forms (e.g., oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, streams, creeks, ground-water, aquifers, and springs). As Kavanaugh notes, Aquinas was optimistic about the human cognitive capacity to recognize the intrinsic goodness of natural goods like water and the volitional capacity to choose to value them (71).

Aquinas also stressed the intrinsic value of the entire creation above any one creature as the greatest natural good. Finding compatibility between the Genesis 1 story of creation and Aristotle's reasoning about the hierarchy of natural goods, Aquinas identified the orderly arrangement of primary elements (water, air, land, and fire), mixed elements, plants, irrational animals, and rational animals that internally sustains the world as the greatest created good (SCG 2.39; 2.22; *Summa Theologiae* 1.96.1), the highest perfection of the created world (SCG 2.45), and its most beautiful attribute (SCG 3.71; Wright, 87).

Many theologians considered God's valuing natural goods as profoundly authoritative. For example, Saint John Chrysostom (347–407 CE) warned: "[W]ho

would dare, even if bursting with arrogant folly, to open his mouth and gainsay the words uttered by God?" Chrysostom held forcefully that anyone who found fault with a creature or inquired in any disparaging way about its purpose would be showing ingratitude to the Creator (*Homilies on Genesis* 10.12–13). Aquinas insisted that criticizing a creature's nature or its natural inclination insults the creator of nature (ST 1.60.1 ad 3; Kavanaugh, 67–81). Augustine attributed to human limitations and self-centeredness our failure to value the natural world. Only God has the ability to comprehend the universe in its entirety. Nevertheless, the "great artificer" of all natural goods wants us to avoid indulging in "silly complaints" about the natural world, Augustine wrote, and "to take

pains" to inquire about the purposes of things and how they fit into God's creation (*City of God* 11.22).

The humility that Augustine conveys when urging us to value the goods that constitute the natural world regardless of their effects on us is indeed profound and worth our pondering. So also is his recognition of our limitations in knowing everything we need to know about the world, including the purposes of natural forces and entities. Despite the amazing advances that scientists have made over the last few decades, the complex interactions of biota and abiota defy easy explanations and preclude predictable outcomes.

As a foundational substance of the world, water is intrinsically valuable in all of its discrete bodies and forms including oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, streams, groundwater, aquifers, springs, ice, rain, snow, sleet, hail, and vapors. Water's value persists despite any adverse effects its forms have on us, and we should value them in themselves. If we wish to follow the direction given by theologians in the Catholic tradition, we will not make disparaging remarks about any type of naturally occurring water.

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Of course, we can no longer think about God's having directly created each body of water or combination thereof with other elements as patristic and medieval theologians thought from their prescientific understanding of the world. Yet we can be firm in our faith that God provided the probability that oxygen and hydrogen would bond to form water and that various formations of water would emerge within our planet. We can also believe firmly that God sustains the existence of the universe with at least one planet that is composed of approximately 70 percent water in its various formations and combinations. And we can hold fast to our faith that each of us is called by God to value water and other natural goods as God calls the entirety of the universe to completion at the end of time.

Valuing Water Instrumentally

Theologians also valued water and other natural goods for their usefulness to one another, their usefulness specifically to humans, and their usefulness to God. The usefulness that natural goods have to one another was based on their understanding that some (e.g., water in its various forms) meet the survival needs of others (e.g., plants and animals), and meeting their needs is essential for the internal functioning of the world. Aquinas systematized this understanding when Christianizing Aristotle's metaphysical portrayal of the hierarchically-structured world in which the usefulness of natural goods to one another was evident. For Aquinas, God intended that the needs of some natural goods would be met by others. According to his metaphysical pondering, mixed bodies rely upon water and the other three primary elements, plants rely upon mixed bodies, animals rely upon plants, and humans rely upon animals and plants to sustain their physical needs (SCG 3.22). Meeting their needs according to their natures in this simplistic sustenance chain was considered essential to maintaining themselves individually and collectively in existence.

By meeting their needs through their interactions as God intended, natural goods also achieve the temporal common good of the universe—its internal sustainability. According to Aquinas, God instilled in each creature an inclination toward the common good (ST 1-2.2.109.3 and 2-2. 2.26.3) that accords with a creature's innate characteristics and way of existing (ST 2-2.26.3). Aquinas taught that while all natural goods are inclined toward their sustainability—their common good—those who have a greater capacity to act have a greater appetite for the common good. Thereby, they are inclined to seek to do good for others, even for those far removed from themselves (SCG 3.24). The human aptitude for the common good requires that a person will a particular good to the common good; if the person does not, the willful act is not right (ST 1-2.19.10). What is right is based on an action's being directed ultimately toward God.

That humans should value the physical world with its diverse interacting constituents is also supported by Aquinas's teaching that God has given us "natural dominion" over God's creation while God maintains "absolute dominion" (ST 1.96.1). The natural dominion we exercise is based on our ability to know and to will good ends. Of course, we are always subservient to God's unlimited dominion when exercising our limited dominion.

From this instrumentalist perspective, the human use of water to sustain human life would fit in the grand scheme of all natural entities' functioning to bring about the internal common good of all. However, reports of human abuse of bodies of water and overconsumption of freshwater are legion (Schaefer, 205–207; Glennon). As believers in God, the creator, sustainer, and intrinsic-instrumental valuer of water and other natural goods, we need to reexamine our ways of thinking about water from a theological perspective and to put our faith into practice. Two ways are (1) to express gratitude to God for the oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, streams, swamps, bogs, groundwater, aquifers, and other forms of water that we encounter, and (2) to use them with restraint for the necessities of life as theologians in the patristic and medieval periods urged.

Expressing Gratitude to God for Water

Theologians have repeatedly urged the faithful to express their gratitude to God for natural goods that are useful to them during their temporal lives. Characterizing Earth as "mother and nurse" created by God to nourish humans, Chrysostom taught that we are destined by God to enjoy Earth as our "homeland," for which we should be grateful to God (*Homilies on Genesis* 9.3 and 10.12). Augustine described the world as full of "blessings" from God for humans to "behold and use," and he lamented not being able to describe them adequately (*City of God* 22.24).

Saint Basil of Caesarea (329–379 CE) urged his followers to acknowledge their "gratitude for the useful plants" and even for those that pose hazards to human life. God did not create everything for human stomachs, he cautioned. Yet not one plant is without value, he insisted, whether useful or harmful to us (*On the Hexameron* 5.4). He considered the earth's ability to perpetuate many species as "the marvel of creation" (5.2) and "a rich treasure" that humans should acknowledge as having been provided by God (5.4). Being able to study these plants is "an additional cause for thankfulness," he wrote (5.4), a message that must be heeded today in light of the complex interrelationships of plants with other species and components of ecological systems that require careful scrutiny in order to know how best to function in relation to them so we do not thwart their efforts to survive and flourish.

Desiring fidelity to the Christian tradition, we must thank God for water and other basic elements that are essential to the functioning of Earth. As creatures who emerged from the divinely sustained evolutionary process, we should be expressing our gratitude to God for water as a natural good that God makes available for our use and the use of other species.

Demonstrating Gratitude to God through Restraint

Expressing gratitude to God for water and other goods must go beyond our lips if we embrace the Catholic tradition. We must use water with restraint. For patristic and medieval theologians, restraint meant (1) reasoning to the use of intrinsically-instrumental natural goods rather than succumbing to our irrational desires, and (2) limiting our intake of these goods to the necessities of life rather than seeking to satisfy our superfluous wants. Some theologians also taught explicitly or implicitly that we should use God's creation to learn about it and about God (Schaefer, 65–93, 200–221).

Reasoning to Restraint

Patristic and medieval theologians believed that the ability to make and execute reasoned, informed decisions distinguish humans from other creatures, so exercising these abilities to determine our use of God's creation is mandatory. Origen (185–254 CE) stressed that God appointed humankind to rule the natural world as God's partner. However, he continued, we are needier than irrational animals that have protective coverings and other natural attributes. By using our ability to reason, we can obtain the necessities of life by developing agricultural, gardening, carpentry, and navigation skills (*Contra Celsum* 4.76). Augustine urged his readers to use God's creation wisely and appropriately. From his perspective, we should not be like heretics who fail to recognize the goodness of creation and the human place in the splendid order of all goods created by God (*City of God* 11.22).

John Scotus Eriugena (810–ca. 877 CE) also urged the faithful to think carefully about their use of God's creation. God created humans with the ability to reason, and acting irrationally mars "their natural beauty" and diminishes the dignity of the human as having the image and likeness of God (*Periphyseon* 5). Irrational impulses are "diametrically opposed" to the rational nature of humans and must be self-controlled. According to Eriugena, God's gift of the ability to reason will guide us in using natural goods for the glory and service of God, "the Bestower of all good things." When succumbing to our irrational impulses to use material

goods to gratify our “perverse” desires, we are acting in opposition to our rational natures (*Periphyseon* 5).

Aquinas also stressed the need for humans to use their ability to reason when determining their use of natural goods. Differentiating between rational and irrational animals when explaining the term “use,” he taught that the use of something requires two acts: the act of the will and the act of reason. Human use of other creatures is both an act of the will by which we intentionally apply external things to an operation (e.g., use a horse to ride or use a stick to strike) and also an act of reason by which we decide how to make the application. Only a rational animal is capable of these two acts, whereas other animals act according to natural instinct (ST 1-2.16.1–2). Furthermore, the application of an operation must fit into the natural order of things to one another for their sustenance, Aquinas taught, and their use cannot be ends in themselves since they are not the ultimate goal of human existence. If we use natural goods as ends in themselves, our rational power is disordered, since we have strayed from God’s will that we order our actions ultimately to God (ST 1-2.71.1–2 and 74.5).

Commenting on the Genesis 1 story of creation, Aquinas taught that our responsibility for exercising dominion over other natural creatures requires the use of our ability to reason and our exercise of the virtue of prudence (ST 1.96.1–2, and 1-2.74.5–6). Furthermore, our use of natural goods must manifest our reverence for God as our mutual creator and sustainer in existence. If we do not, we shed our unique dignity among other creatures and fail to live according to our rational nature (ST 2-2.64.2 ad 3).

Have we not shed our dignity among creatures by failing to use our ability to reason when overfishing oceans, lakes, and rivers? By dumping waste into them? By bleaching coral reefs? By polluting them with persistent toxins? By draining them for superfluous development projects? By diverting them to naturally arid areas to establish lawns, golf courses, and other unnatural landscapes? And, by innumerable other abuses? Signs of failure to develop the virtue of prudence abound, especially in economically developed regions of our planet.

Use for the Necessities of Life

The Catholic theological literature is replete with admonitions that Christians use God’s creation only to sustain ourselves in temporal life while aiming for eternal happiness with God. Inherent in this teaching is a sense of justice requiring that others, particularly the poor and vulnerable, are *also* able to obtain potable water and other essentials (Schaefer 197–200).

Some theologians approached limiting human use of natural goods from the biblical perspective. Saint Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–395 CE) asserted that humans are intended to satisfy their needs in this life by serving God as masters over

creation. He was specific about the use of horses to help humans move more quickly, the use of sheep for clothing, the use of oxen for food, the use of the dog jawbone for knives, and the use of iron for protection (471–509). Saint Theodoret of Cyrus (390–458 CE) depicted the human person as a triumphant doer and transformer whose hands and arms serve the mind to plow and sow the land, dig ditches, cut vines, reap the harvest, bind the sheaves, and winnow the grain. God gave humans the wisdom with which to invent the tools they need for mining, agriculture, and traveling, and, through this gift of wisdom, humans can embellish the earth with flowery meadows, rich harvests, spacious woods, and routes over the sea (30–32). These theologians wrote from the perspective that humans are always responsible to God who gives them the ability to reason about how to use God’s creation.

Many instructed the faithful to use God’s creation as a means of supporting their temporal lives while aiming for eternal life with God. Augustine reserved the term “use” when willing the material support needed during one’s temporal life and “enjoy” when willing what is appropriate to eternal life as an end in itself (O’Connor, 45–62). He also urged restraint when using other natural goods as means to support their temporal lives (*City of God* 11.22).

Some theologians were concerned about the appropriate use of natural goods. Augustine encouraged understanding and using natural goods in ways that are conducive to their natures (*City of God* 11.22). He sternly warned that the faithful who made improper use of temporal goods “shall not receive the blessings of eternal life” (19.13). Aquinas advanced appropriate use of natural goods in light of their purposes in the scheme of the hierarchical structure God established. The orderly creation signals appropriate use insofar as plants exist for animals to eat, animals exist for other animals, and all exist for humans to eat or use in other ways (*De Natura Boni* 3.127). Today, knowing how water functions in relation to plants, marine life, areas bordering the shores, and the air regimes should direct us to identifying ways in which to function that are conducive to the natural order of ecological systems and the biosphere.

For Aquinas and others, the faithful should only use God’s creation for the necessities of life (ST 1-2.4.6–7, and 114.10). The necessities of life are goods we need to support our bodies, such as food, clothing, transportation (ST 2-2.141.6), and things without which we cannot carry on their lives in appropriate ways as

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we seek eternal happiness with God (ST 1-2.4.6–7). Aquinas however, explicitly proscribed the exorbitant use of God's natural goods, describing it as inordinate and wasteful (ST 2-2.83.6), immoderate (2-2.169.1), disordered, and vicious (SCG 4.83). The excessive use of natural goods was judged sinful in the scheme of the human desire for eternity with God (ST 2-2.118.1), since human attention must ultimately be centered on God.

Assuring that others have the goods they need to sustain their lives concerned some theologians. Saint Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547 CE) stipulated in Rule 34 that the abbot of a monastery should distribute food, drink, and other goods to the monks solely on the basis of their needs. He recognized that different persons have different needs, so he instructed his abbots to use discretion and compassion when distributing goods to monks. Nevertheless, nothing superfluous was to be distributed to any monk, since frugality was key to running the monasteries (Rule 34).

Aquinas and others were concerned about some people having more than they need while others are unable to sustain themselves and their families. An individual who possesses or desires to possess immoderate amounts of material goods sins against another, since one individual cannot have an abundance of external riches without other individuals lacking them (ST 2-2.58.5-9 and 118.1). He strongly proscribed coveting material goods (ST 2-2.118.1) as did Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022 CE). Coveting material things is sinful, Symeon warned, and hoarders “owe a debt of penitence to their dying day for all that they so long have kept back and deprived their brothers” (9.4)! Those who scatter goods abroad generously to others in need “with joy and magnanimity, not reluctantly or under compulsion,” are set free from condemnation of covetousness and are on their way to “eternal life and enjoyment” of God (9.7). Today, hoarding freshwater by a community or a country would be proscribed, while acting to assure that individuals, communities, and countries now and into the future have access to the freshwater would be mandatory.

Valuing and Expressing Our Gratitude for Water

The Catholic theological tradition encourages valuing all naturally occurring bodies of water both intrinsically for themselves and instrumentally for their usefulness to humans and other species. Freshwater in its various forms is especially valuable from an instrumentalist perspective because our and other species cannot survive without it. If we follow the rationale of theologians in our tradition, we will demonstrate our valuing water by expressing our gratitude to God for having provided the probability that water would emerge through the cosmological-biological process, become an integral part of our planet and its constituents, and contribute an ingredient that is indispensable to our and other species' lives. We

express our gratitude in words by thanking God for every form of water we encounter or use. We also express our gratitude to God by using our intellectual abilities to identify and avoid actions that degrade the quality of water, to cooperate with others in restoring the quality of waters that have been degraded, to use water appropriately, to limit our uses to the necessities of life, to facilitate individual and collective initiatives in obtaining the water they need for their lives, and to avoid interfering with other species' access to water.

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