Wealthy Hyperagency in the Throwaway Culture: Inequality and Environmental Death

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Chapter 5

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Inequality and Environmental Death

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Laudato Si’, popularly known as Pope Francis’s “environmental encyclical,” is much more than that: a tour de force manifesto on anthropology, ecology and economic life, and the connections among them. Throughout, Francis shows how a correct understanding of human dignity and purpose—one which places human life in the context of an “integral ecology”—encourages caring for those in need. This includes concern for those harmed by unjust economic systems, as well as for Earth itself. In contrast, those who misunderstand human nature waste the planet’s riches and accept the wanton destruction of human lives. They reject encounter with others, particularly those in need. The encyclical reiterates that climate change and pollution have disparate impacts, visiting displacement, poor health, and even premature death to many groups of people, but most disproportionately to the poor (LS 20, 25, 29, 48, 51). Climate change has disparate causes as well as effects, with consumers in wealthy countries bearing most of the blame: “It is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels” (LS 27).

Although Francis does not use the term, the power of rich-world consumers to destroy nature and harm others can fairly be described as hyperagency. I will discuss the sociological use of the term “hyperagency” and demonstrate how Laudato Si’ helps construct a theological account of this outsize power and privilege. In the encyclical’s broadened theological understanding, hyperagency would be viewed as a misguided anthropocentrism. It manifests in ignorance and self-justification by those in power, with fatal consequences for the poor. This outsize power occurs at the nexus of personal spirituality
and social structure; thus, it is no surprise to see Francis prescribing both personal virtues and social measures in response.

**HYPERAGENCY**

"Hyperagency" is a term that Paul Schervish uses to describe wealthy philanthropists who exert control over their own and others' lives and circumstances to a degree unavailable to those of ordinary means. As a sociologist, Schervish describes hyperagency without morally normative language, capturing its practical impact on hyperagents, and on societies:

Wealth holders are uniquely endowed with material resources and cognitive dispositions that enable them, both as a group and as individuals, to fashion outcomes they desire to effect. . . . Whereas all individuals exercise agency, the distinctive class trait of hyperagency is the capacity to establish rather than merely receive the social matrix within which they live.

Schervish's descriptive work offers a useful language to address a long-standing concern in theological ethics: the wealthy wield power over the poor, often without even realizing how profoundly they affect the lives of those in need. *Laudato Si*, which also explores this theme, will be used to provide a theological dimension to the concept of hyperagency. I will expand on Schervish's usage of the term in two ways: I will take the normative position that hyperagency harms the poor practically and harms hyperagents spiritually, and I will locate hyperagency among well-off consumers everywhere, not limiting it to wealthy philanthropists.

With his global perspective, Francis identifies the many ways citizens of wealthy nations exert hyperagency over those in poorer societies. Even middle-class citizens of wealthy nations are wealthy by comparison to the world's poor, and by consuming at normal standards in their own context, they exercise the power of hyperagents—thoughtlessly degrading the environment and inflicting suffering disproportionately on the poor of the world. Hyperagency is visible in many sinful practices detailed in *Laudato Si*: ignorance of the condition of the poor, self-justification for consumption practices known to be destructive, and the death-dealing consumption practices themselves. Francis finds it utterly appropriate for members of societies to exercise their collective power to constrain the hyperagency of the wealthy through such measures as laws governing environmental practices and redistributing wealth (*LS* 179).

Francis shows how the outsize power of the wealthy is not simply an accident of history, wherein the naturally generated fruits of the free market
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simply happen to flow disproportionately to certain groups of people. Rather, hyperagency both results from and encourages a fatally flawed anthropology. "Misguided anthropocentrism" is a key theme in *Laudato Si'*, allowing Francis to explain how disregard for human lives and for the environment roots in a false understanding of human potential, purpose, and power. He explains:

> When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests. (*LS 122*)

“One cannot prescind from humanity” (*LS 118*), meaning that human nature, rightly understood, and human flourishing must form our priorities. When we falsely imagine that the goal of human life is to wield power over other creatures, it is a short step to seeing other creatures as tools for our use, valueless unless they can be bent to our power. While all persons are touched and wounded by sin (*LS 2*), those who wield power by virtue of their wealth and social position both cause greater harm and experience feedback that rewards their misperception of humanity. Hyperagency encourages the false perception that we can, indeed, control our environment and control others, encouraging the "misguided anthropocentrism" Francis so strongly cautions against. Francis reminds us that "the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us,” but rather in God’s “transcendent fullness” (*LS 83*).

While technology is not harmful in itself, much of it is currently used in ways that exacerbate the problems of hyperagency and misguided anthropocentrism. Francis describes and criticizes a "technocratic paradigm" (*LS 101*) which places no limits on human freedom (*LS 6*). The technocratic paradigm encourages compulsive consumption and "leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume. But those who are really free are the minority who wield economic and financial power" (*LS 203*). Indeed, the technocratic paradigm valorizes hyperagency as it upholds the powerful, acting subject:

> This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. . . . This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. (*LS 106*)

The power of technology and the assumption that control is the way to interact with Earth contributes to hyperagency.
**Ignorance**

One of the most insidious powers that hyperagency bestows is the ability to remain unaffected by the needs of others, proceeding in blissful ignorance of the plight of other human beings and of Earth. Francis explicitly connects global financial power with the ability to remain ignorant of the condition of the poor. In their privilege, the wealthy have structured societies to enable this:

There is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. . . . This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. . . . This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience. (LS 49)

"Encounter" is widely recognized as a keystone of Francis’s spirituality, particularly visible in the apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium. For Francis, the believer’s encounter with Christ inspires a practice of encounter with poor and marginalized persons that is transformative, humanizing, and spiritually “healthy.” Choosing to live a life structured around the avoidance of encounter with the poor betrays a failure to understand how profoundly we are all interrelated.

**Self-justification**

Those with hyperagency struggle to maintain their blissful ignorance by presenting self-justifying perspectives regarding their own complicity in the oppression of Earth and the poor. Francis elaborates:

We are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear. . . . Such evasiveness serves as a license to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen. (LS 59)

This passage subtly evokes Thomas Aquinas’s concept of “vincible ignorance,” present in situations where agents could have known better and are therefore culpable for their own ignorance. This is not exculpatory, but a reminder that proper knowledge of the state of environmental and human affairs demands, and deserves, some effort from those with hyperagency.

Hyperagency is taught by cultures and within families. Francis points out how family responsibilities can be used to justify excessive consumption, treating the family as a prideful extension of the individual:
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Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today’s self-centered culture of instant gratification. . . . Parents can be prone to impulsive and wasteful consumption, which then affects their children who find it increasingly difficult to acquire a home of their own and build a family. (LS 162)

While the hyperagency of rich-world consumers has pernicious global effects, in the everyday lives of hyperagents, it can appear not only banal but also defensible, even virtuous.

Francis gently yet searchingly indicts the ways that those with hyperagency indulge in self-justification even in their environmental responses, shifting blame and suffering away from themselves onto others. He strongly warns those with hyperagency who shift environmental responsibility to those in poverty, perhaps in an effort to legitimate and continue their own destructive consumption. One example is attempts to impose population controls on impoverished countries, blaming ecological destruction on birth rates among the poor instead of “extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some” (LS 50). Indigenous peoples should be involved in decision-making over what happens to land, rather than solutions being imposed from outside without regard to local practice (LS 144–146). Well-meaning hyperagents even inflict unintentional injustice in attempts to cultivate appreciation of nature: “Frequently, we find beautiful and carefully manicured green spaces in so-called ‘safer’ areas of cities, but not in the more hidden areas where the disposable of society live” (LS 45).

Death-Dealing

We saw that Schervish’s sociological definition of hyperagency focuses on material reality; it is observable fact that the very wealthy have disproportionate power to shape material environments and the lives of others. While Francis would say that hyperagency stems from the spiritual problem of misguided anthropocentrism, Laudato Si’ also acknowledges that hyperagency does not simply impact the spirit, but has fatal material outcomes. Whether we simply wield our hyperagency thoughtlessly or view it as a positive good to actively pursue, it erodes human relationships, destroys nature, and takes human lives. “When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society,” Francis writes. “This vision of ‘might is right’ has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all” (LS 82).
For Francis, the accumulation of wealth and power by a few is not a coincidental parallel to the suffering and need of many. Rather, the two are as intimately connected as clouds and rain:

We should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights (LS 90).

Francis draws a loop through mistreatment of children and the elderly, laissez-faire economic policies, “human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds,” abortion and the sale of poor people’s organs (LS 123). Each of these exploitative ways of treating humans and the environment stem from the “culture of relativism,” relying on created beings for one’s own profit and power.

Hyperagency extends to appropriating for private gain natural resources that sustain life and should be considered human rights, foremost among them water (LS 30). When those with hyperagency fail to distribute resources justly, they are responsible for the deaths of those who must go without. Francis insists:

If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others. That is why the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shall not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive.” (LS 95)

Francis demonstrates detailed understanding of the banality with which many wealthy world consumers destroy the environment in the service of their own comfort, without giving it a thought: “A simple example is the increasing use and power of air-conditioning” (LS 55). The volume of cars carrying single persons around cities, “consuming enormous quantities of non-renewable energy,” justly earns his criticism (LS 153). Less banal, but equally damaging, are certain illicit consumption practices of wealthy consumers, which Francis does not hesitate to indict: “Drug use in affluent societies creates a continual and growing demand for products imported from poorer regions, where behaviour is corrupted, lives are destroyed, and the environment continues to deteriorate” (LS 142).
THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO HYPERAGENCY

Francis demonstrates how understanding the human person in light of integral ecology ought to deter us from making hyperagency a goal or accepting its practice. The introduction of sin into human existence described in Genesis indicates that the mandate to “have dominion” over Earth (Gen. 1:28) is fractured by sin (LS 66). Interpreting this as a mandate for unlimited destruction of nature for human purposes “is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church” (LS 67). Maintaining a correct understanding of human life oriented toward God helps combat hyperagency:

“The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over Earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world” (LS 75). In addition, we should correctly see nature neither as divine nor exploitable, but as fragile. “A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power” (LS 78). We honor our integral anthropology by using our human creativity to voluntarily limit our own power, which will help humans live in harmony with persons in need, Earth, and one another.

One human-devised method of voluntarily limiting power is the biblical Jubilee observance, described as a further reminder that “we are not God” (LS 67). Observing periodic years when the earth is reaped only for subsistence, not for wealth-building, reminded the Israelite people, and reminds us today, that “the gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone” (LS 71). Latin American Biblical scholars have called for a new perspective on economic life inspired by Jubilee, one which resists free-market doctrine and resets unequal wealth accumulated by unjust social structures. Francis recommends this practice as a reminder that domination of Earth is also domination of poor persons who depend on Earth and do not have the economic power to protect themselves from others’ destructive power. The divine requirement to periodically forego the power one could otherwise wield seeks to reset understandings of one’s own place in the cosmos and in economic relationships with others.

Francis is specific and prescriptive about “differentiated responsibilities” in responding to climate change. Wealthy, high-consuming nations and their citizens have different duties than poorer nations whose resources are often extracted without benefiting their own people (LS 167). He specifies:

Developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future. . . . The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and
by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programs of sustainable development. (LS 52)

Francis supports this challenge by quoting the U.S. bishops. Referencing an episcopal statement from a powerful, wealthy, high-consuming nation is a clear reminder of his expectation that wealthy nations step up to their differentiated responsibilities and practice preference for the poor.

No less appropriate and urgent than voluntary measures are legal restrictions societies could introduce to constrain and distribute the power of those with hyperagency:

The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable; otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice. (LS 53)

It is not simply the responsibility of governments to institute such restrictions: citizens must organize to demand them (LS 179). Global agreements must be enforceable and attentive to potential exploitation of poorer nations by richer ones (LS 173). Francis shows the consistency of Church teaching in urging this, affirming Benedict XVI’s call for “a true world political authority” (LS 175) and referencing John Paul II when he says, “Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in ‘lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies’” (LS 5). To ensure meaningful distribution of the resources God has given to all of humanity, restraints on economic power are entirely appropriate as well (LS 129). Boycotts are an effective way of constraining the power of businesses that also honors the social nature of human beings, who are stronger when they work together (LS 206).

ECOLOGICAL VIRTUES FOR HYPERAGENTS

In the ecumenical prayer with which Francis closes Laudato Si’, he makes a special request for those with hyperagency, asking God: “Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live.” His prayer highlights both divine and human agency, reminding the faithful that hyperagents need God’s grace for moral growth while encouraging the wealthy to take action on behalf of others. This dual focus on God’s action and human response exemplifies Christian virtue ethics, which focuses on the consistent qualities of moral goodness humans
pursue and acquire with God’s help. The prayer’s intentions—that those with hyperagency care for the good of others and restrain their own power to serve others and the planet—parallel the ecological virtues Francis prescribes to hyperagents throughout *Laudato Si’*; virtues of solidarity and temperance. With its focus on everyday practices (*LS* 230–31) and habits (*LS* 209, 211) and its integral connection between personal spirituality and social behavior, *Laudato Si’* is ripe for reading through a virtue lens.

**Solidarity**

Solidarity is the virtue through which we commit ourselves to the good of others with “a firm and persevering determination.” It describes an emotional feeling, an intellectual commitment, and an active practice, and *Laudato Si’* demonstrates the full range of its potential. “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it” (*LS* 229), Francis writes.

Clearly, hyperagency can tempt us away from the pursuit of this virtue. Demonstrating the integral logic of *Laudato Si’*, Francis connects selfishness and turning away from others with consumer greed and disdain for the common good:

> The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes “a seedbed for collective selfishness.” When people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon, a genuine sense of the common good also disappears. (*LS* 204)

Social factors, while they may powerfully affect our moral formation, do not fully determine virtue (*LS* 205). Despite the many pressures eroding solidarity, it is a built-in part of human nature: “For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love” (*LS* 58). “We are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other” (*LS* 208) Francis adds, echoing a resonant theme from *Evangelii Gaudium*. “Going out of ourselves” is a key criterion for encounter, where solidarity is sparked.

Catholic social thought rejects utilitarian notions of social good—that societies pursue the greatest good for the greatest number—and affirms the common good, which seeks the flourishing of all members of society, particularly the most vulnerable. Francis calls particular attention to two groups whose needs should be paramount among those who seek to display solidarity by
pursuing the common good. Those who pursue solidarity must demonstrate particular concern for the poor in today’s world (LS 158) and future generations who depend on our actions in the present, in need of our “intergenerational solidarity” (LS 159).

Virtue ethics acknowledges that dispositions develop through practices. Francis acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between laws, the practices they encourage, and the spiritual dispositions they can help persons develop: “If [environmental] laws are to bring about significant, long-lasting effects, the majority of the members of society must be adequately motivated to accept them, and personally transformed to respond. Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment (LS 211).” *Laudato Si’* proposes many concrete actions of solidarity, though they may differ depending on one’s role in global environmental and economic systems. We have already discussed the responsibilities of high-consuming countries to make sacrifices in addressing climate change (LS 169, 170); while Francis understands that poor countries may need to prioritize improving conditions for their poorest citizens, he points out that even poor countries have many wealthy citizens who may need to hear similar calls to sacrifice as those in wealthy countries (LS 172). For poor people, solidarity is directed to those who share their plight. Francis notes the real presence of solidarity in the lives of the poor, describing how despite the overcrowding, crime and violence to which many poor communities fall prey, “many people in these conditions are able to weave bonds of belonging and togetherness” (149).

*Laudato Si’* proposes practical ways to inculcate solidarity from the local to the global context. Grace before meals is a simple practice to cultivate both humility before God and solidarity with those who lack enough (LS 227). Societal structures can be useful as well; urban planning can either encourage or discourage encounter among humans and with nature, and thus can be a powerful tool to promote solidarity (LS 151). Activism on the local level is effective in developing renewable sources of energy and promoting responsible consumption, as well as transforming persons by encouraging responsibility, solidarity, and community spirit (LS 179–180). Francis specifies that both personal moral transformation and collective social action are necessary to address such a vast, complex problem as climate change (LS 219).

**Temperance**

Temperance is the virtue through which we moderate our use of goods, including food and drink, sex, and power. While Francis does not use the term in *Laudato Si’*, a key disposition in the integral anthropology he proposes is described as “sobriety.” Sobriety follows on solidarity: “If we feel intimately
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united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously,” as we see in the life of St. Francis (LS 11). Francis points out that an attitude of sobriety or temperance toward the use of possessions is believed by many religious traditions to be a key to happiness:

We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that “less is more.” . . . It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. . . . Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating (LS 222–223).

Temperance is not simply about actions, about what we do or do not consume. Rather it describes our disposition to what we do consume; an attitude of enjoyment, gratitude, and satisfaction with enough, even (or especially) in a consumerist atmosphere where too much is never enough. As a disposition toward all the goods one uses in life, temperance ramifies through all our relationships; it demands a recognition of our dependence on God, peace with one’s self, and connection to others and to nature (LS 224–225).

Temperance is not a crabbed self-denial, but a disposition to use goods according to their proper purpose. A temperate life incorporates celebration and joy. Francis notes that a spirit of celebration and rest from work “prevents that unfettered greed and sense of isolation which make us seek personal gain to the detriment of all else . . . and motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor” (LS 237). Conversion to pursuit of the ecological virtues “entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift” (LS 220). We can clearly see that Francis’s vision of celebration is not the giddy consumerism of the “throwaway culture”; perhaps there are no paper plates or meat on the tables at this celebration. Temperate celebration appreciates the goods of creation for what they are: signs of our reliance on the graciousness of God and of others; gifts for our use but not tools to be used and wasted.

CONCLUSION

Hyperagency is a material problem with spiritual effects. Due to the way humans have chosen to structure economic systems and to engage with the created environment, a small group of persons control humans, spaces, and time to a degree that is unavailable to others and destructive of human dignity. The way rich-world consumers use resources deals a death to the poor of the world and harms the spiritual lives of hyperagents as they self-justify their
own destructive and ignorant lifestyles. Despite his frank acknowledgement of this particular manifestation of universal human sinfulness, Francis holds out hope for the spiritual improvement of hyperagents, with the help of God and their own communities. By practicing solidarity and temperance, hyperagents can aspire to become persons who deeply commit to the needs of others and who use goods with wisdom, gratitude, and joy. Practicing these environmental virtues contributes to an integral anthropology, a way of understanding, and living human life in right relationship with God, Earth, and one another.

NOTES


5. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 87.


7. Francis should have mentioned the church’s own history of complicity with the ongoing dominance and exclusion of indigenous peoples in formerly colonized nations. See e.g. Sebastian C. H. Kim, “Editorial [Globalization and Global
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