Green Purpose: Teleology, Ecological Ethics, and the Recovery of Contemplation

Andreas Nordlander
Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract
According to one influential narrative, a significant root of our ecological crisis is to be found in the Christian appropriation of teleology, undergirding the anthropocentrism endemic to Western thought. This article challenges this argument in three steps. First, I present the Aristotelian understanding of teleology, which is intrinsic to living organisms, and which has been suggested as a resource for ecological ethics. Second, I argue that the rejection of intrinsic teleology in favour of an extrinsic teleology first occurs with modern philosophy, in tandem with a new pragmatic conception of knowledge. Third, I provide an alternative construal of the early Christian understanding of teleology, through the figure of Maximus the Confessor, arguing that his understanding of the contemplation of nature is a key resource to be recovered for ecological ethics. I end with a sketch of such a recovery, as articulated by Thomas Merton.

Keywords
Aristotle, contemplation, ecology, Maximus the Confessor, mechanism, teleology, Thomas Merton

Introduction
According to one highly influential narrative, the most significant conceptual root of the ecological crisis of our time is the pervasive anthropocentric orientation of all values, which is claimed to be inherent in the Christian tradition and its foundational beliefs. On this account, the value of the natural world, including the living world of plants and animals, is reduced to its value for human beings—a way of thinking that has had disastrous consequences.

This argument has been a staple of ecocritical discourse at least since Lynn White published his classic paper ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’ in 1967.1

1. Lynn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, Science 155.3767 (1967), pp. 1203–207.
White argued that certain basic Christian convictions are responsible for the callous attitude to nature that has allowed our devastating pillaging of its resources. In particular, he singled out what he took to be the ultimately biblical notion that the purpose of the physical creation is the purpose it has for human beings: ‘God planned all this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes’. The argument thus hinges on the notion of purpose or *telos* and its close connection to value: without a purpose of its own, nature has no intrinsic value and can thus be used with impunity. Hence, White says, ‘we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man’. While White’s thesis has been widely and critically discussed for half a century, it continues to have significant traction for scholars engaged in ecological ethics.

In this article I focus on the central component of the argument—that of teleology, or the purposes of nature—not in relation to White’s thesis as such, but to a more recent articulation of its core idea in the context of attempting to retrieve ancient resources for contemporary ecological ethics.

The historian of philosophy Monte Ransome Johnson has recently pointed to Aristotle’s conception of the teleology of living organisms as a key resource for the greening of ethics. Aristotle is presented as a ‘biophilic’ philosopher and the Aristotelian teleological framework as able to counter the ‘axiological anthropocentrism’ endemic to Western thought. In the course of presenting his argument, Johnson reproduces the basic narrative, according to which the Christian appropriation of the Aristotelian legacy of teleological thinking is one significant source of our ecological crisis, in that it rejected the Aristotelian understanding of naked purpose *intrinsic* to natural organisms in favour of an understanding of purpose as divine intention and therefore as *externally* imposed on the organism. By thus externalizing the purposes of living organisms, theology, it is argued, paved the way for a vision of the natural world as raw material to be used for human purposes alone, with little thought for the value inherent in non-human creation in its own right.

In what follows, I present this argument more fully, but then also challenge its governing narrative vis-à-vis the early Christian understanding of teleology. I agree with Johnson (and White) that the understanding of teleology is crucial for ecological ethics, because it is so closely linked with the perception of value, as I shall argue presently. But I want to suggest an alternative construal of the Christian appropriation of teleology, one that takes proper account of the transformation of teleological and epistemological concepts that occurs with early modern philosophy, in which a novel understanding of our relation to the natural world comes into play. After this first critical part, I then argue a more positive case at length: that the premodern Christian tradition of the contemplation of nature, especially as developed by Maximus the Confessor, presents us with resources for imagining a different way of relating to the natural world that our ecological situation

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2. White, ‘Historical Roots’, p. 1205.
3. White, ‘Historical Roots’, p. 1207.
4. For critical discussion of White’s thesis, see further Elspeth Whitney, ‘Lynn White Jr.’s “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” After 50 Years’, *History Compass* 13.8 (2015), pp. 396–410.
5. Monte Ransome Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
so desperately requires. In particular, I argue that Maximus did not reject the earlier Greek conception of contemplation but rather deepened it, even as he did not reject an intrinsic teleology of creatures in favour of an extrinsic one but rather transformed these concepts through his doctrine of the *logoi*. Thus, using Maximus as a case in point, I challenge the received narrative in which the early Christian conception of *telos* becomes the environmental culprit, and suggest it instead—in a move parallel to that of Johnson—as a key resource needing to be recovered, because teleology, contemplation, and the perception of value belong together. To illustrate what such a recovery—by no means a simple matter—of the ancient Christian practice of natural contemplation may look like, I end with a reflection on the work of Thomas Merton.

**Retrieving the Green Aristotle**

Aristotle’s account of teleology admits of numerous interpretations and spans several fields from metaphysics to biology to ethics and politics. However, the fundamental form of teleology for Aristotle—what he calls ‘that-for-the-sake-of-which’ (τὸ ὑὲ ἔνεκε), or simply ‘the end’ (τὸ τέλος), or ‘the why’ (τὸ διὰ τί)—is that exemplified by living organisms.

To give a teleological account of a living organism is to give an account not in terms of its material configuration, but in terms of its ‘substantial form’ and its inherent tendencies to realise certain ends. Moreover, Aristotle realised that these ends are always related to the good of the organism itself as a specific nature, which is to say to its flourishing as the kind of living thing it is. In Johnson’s summary: ‘(1) natural motion happens for the sake of something, and (2) what it happens for, intrinsically, is the good of the natural substance that is moved’.

One key to Aristotle’s conception of the teleology operative in nature is his often-repeated analogy between nature and an artist. The artist works for the sake of producing the artwork—the artwork is the end towards which the artist works—and in a similar way, nature operates towards the end of producing fully formed and flourishing organisms. As Aristotle puts it: ‘Just as human creations are the products of art, so living objects are manifestly the products of an analogous cause or principle [τῖς ἄρχή καὶ ἀρχὴ τοιοῦτον]’. There is, however, an important difference—in art, the artwork’s principle of organization is *external* to it (in the mind of the artist), whereas this principle

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6. For an excellent presentation, see Robert Spaemann, *Natürliche Ziele: Geschichte und Wiederentdeckung des teleologischen Denkens* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005), chap. 2.
7. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, p. 287; Martha Nussbaum, *Aristotle’s De Motu Animalium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 60.
8. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, p. 286.
9. ‘The term “nature” is used over 250 times in *PA* II-IV [On the Parts of Animals]. Approximately one-fourth of the time, “nature” is the subject of a verb of agency, the verb often borrowed from human artistic contexts.’ James G. Lennox, *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Biology: Studies in the Origins of Life Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 206. Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* II 199a12-19, 199b26-33.
10. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* I 641b14, trans. A.L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).
is *internal* to the organism in nature.\textsuperscript{11} In contrast to Plato’s vision in the *Timaeus*, where the demiurge organises the material world, Aristotle clearly envisages an intrinsic teleology operative in living organisms—nature is self-organising, to borrow a more recent term. The upshot is that the purposes of living organisms are their own; they are not somehow imposed on the organism from without.\textsuperscript{12}

Aristotelian natural teleology is currently making something of a comeback, with several notable thinkers arguing that a return to teleology is needed to overcome some of the most vexing questions of modern philosophy.\textsuperscript{13} Among these, the most thorough and comprehensive treatment of Aristotelian teleology is Johnson’s book, which ingeniously frames Aristotle as particularly relevant in an ecologically aware age:

> The interpretation I have in mind recognizes that the most important feature of Aristotelian teleology is that it presents an alternative to the anthropocentric, creationist, and providential schemes of teleology that were favoured by Aristotle’s predecessors, and were later popular in the commentarial tradition’s appropriation of Aristotle, and in the early modern period’s natural theology.\textsuperscript{14}

As such, Johnson says,

> Aristotle’s teleology can change the way we view and relate to other natural entities. . . . Aristotle gives us good reasons . . . why we ought to value other natural things more for their own ends than for what we can do with them . . . we still need to come over to the Aristotelian view that humans are not at the centre of the axiological universe . . . Aristotelian teleology . . . has something to show us about our relationship to nature.\textsuperscript{15}

With his intrinsic understanding of teleology, Aristotle provides, according to Johnson’s reading, a radically non-anthropocentric understanding of nature, which makes him a vital resource in the attempt to construct an ethical framework to replace the anthropocentrism of the Western tradition, as diagnosed by White and others. It all turns on the conception of teleology and the mode of knowing nature that this conception invites.

To begin to see the force of this argument we need to consider three related points about Aristotle’s thinking in this domain.

\textsuperscript{11} This is the gist of Aristotle’s argument in *Physics* II.

\textsuperscript{12} On the contrast between external and internal, art and nature, in conceptions of teleology, see further, Michael Ruse, *Darwin and Design: Does Nature Have a Purpose* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 17–18; Etienne Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984), pp. 118, 148.

\textsuperscript{13} E.g. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Terrence Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

\textsuperscript{14} Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{15} Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, pp. 4–5.
First, return to the central Aristotelian insight mentioned above: the telos—the aim towards which the organism is by nature directed—is always also the beneficial or good of the organism itself. This implies that the purpose of a living thing is not primarily to be explained by reference to the ways in which it might benefit another living thing. Say, for instance, that we are trying to understand the characteristics and behaviour of a lamb. We shall not succeed if we try to understand it by reference to the ends of the wolf—even though the wolf does have ends that include the lamb. The lamb has its own ends and purposes, and only by investigating these can it be properly understood.16

Second, it follows from this that human use of plants and animals is always incidental to their own more objective ends, like the ends of the wolf in relation to the lamb. This, Johnson argues, yields a ‘naturalized axiology’ that underpins a respect for the objective worth of the natural world irrespective of its relation to human needs and uses. It is true, of course, that humans need to use plants and perhaps animals in order to survive—that much can be justified—but once our basic needs have been met our relation to other living beings should not be governed by human utility.17

Third, our relation to nature should instead primarily be that of theoretical wisdom [σοφία], which is to say contemplation [θεωρία].18 For Aristotle, such theoretical wisdom is distinguished from practical wisdom [φρόνησις] in that it pursues knowledge for its own sake rather than as a means to some other end, such as the use to which the knowledge might be put. In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle suggests that contemplative activity is constitutive of human flourishing [ευδοκιμία]. ‘It is the activity of this part in us [intellect/νοῦς] in accordance with its native excellence that will constitute complete flourishing [τελεία ευδοκιμία]; and it has been stated already that this activity is the activity of contemplation [θεωρητική].’19 Stressing this Aristotelian vision of contemplative knowledge as a primary component of human flourishing, Johnson draws out its ethical significance in relation to non-human organisms:

16. I cannot here address the question of whether, with our own understanding of ecology and evolutionary development, we must say that certain organisms and their behaviour can only be understood if we do indeed take into account how they relate to the ends of other organisms sharing the same natural habitat, nor the discussion about whether Aristotle’s writings contain indications in this direction. Note also that the primacy of intrinsic ends does not conceptually preclude intimate relations between living organisms. The point is rather that the primary ends of such organisms must be their own and these ends must be a fundamental part of our understanding of them, even if not the only relevant ones.

17. Thus, Johnson argues, pace influential commentators such as David Sedley, that Aristotle’s teleology is not as such anthropocentric but quite the opposite. See Sedley, ‘Is Aristotle’s Teleology Anthropocentric?’ Phronesis 36 (1991), pp. 179–96.

18. Johnson, Aristotle on Teleology, p. 10. For Aristotle’s argument for the primacy of contemplation in human life, if it is to be flourishing, see Nicomachean Ethics 10.VI-VIII, and Politics 7.I-III.

19. Nicomachean Ethics 10.VII, 1177a16-18, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934); cf. 10.VIII, 1178b7-8; ‘Complete flourishing is some form of contemplative activity [θεωρητική τις ἔστιν ἐνέργεια].’ Both translations modified.
If practical wisdom was all there was to wisdom, and contemplation had no other and no greater object than the human good, then other natural things, like plants and animals, could justifiably be viewed solely as instruments for human ends. But as it is, the framework of practical reason is subordinate to theoretical wisdom. Theoretical wisdom demands recognition of the independence of other organisms and their ends from human ends, as goods and things of value in themselves, not as mere instruments of human actions.20

If contemplation of other living beings had as its object the ends to which they could be put by us, it would be a form of practical wisdom and not theoretical wisdom, not that God-like activity Aristotle speaks of in book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

This contemplative knowledge of natural ends is deeply connected, for Aristotle, with the admiration of beauty in nature, not primarily the beauty of sensible form, but of ordered structure and intelligibility. In short, in the practice of such knowing, which is undertaken for its own sake rather than as a means to some other end, one focuses on the intrinsic ends of living things given with their forms, making these the object of awe and contemplation:

> We ought . . . boldly to enter upon our researches concerning animals of every sort and kind, knowing that in not one of them is Nature or Beauty [φυσικού καὶ καλοῦ] lacking. Because in the works of Nature purpose [ένεκα τινος] and not accident [τυχόντος] is predominant; and the purpose [ένεκα] or end [τέλους] for the sake of which those works have been constructed or formed has its place among what is beautiful [τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν εἴληφεν].21

Thus, there is arguably in Aristotle a deep connection between the rejection of anthropocentrism, the existence of natural intrinsic ends, and the contemplative ideal of knowledge.

**Modern Knowledge: ‘The Revenge of Martha upon Mary’**

According to Johnson’s analysis, then, the key to the green potential of Aristotelian thought lies in the understanding of *telos* as intrinsic to natural organisms, rather than imposed from without, either by a divine designer, per Plato’s *Timaeus* or the God of Christian belief, or by human needs and purposes. For if they have their own natural ends, they have their own ‘goods’, which must be taken into account in our dealings with them. On this reading, two opposing construals of teleology—and therefore of value—are at play: the ‘naturalized axiology’ of Aristotle and the ‘axiological anthropocentrism’ of his Platonism-leaning appropriators in the commentarial tradition. Indeed, with the

20. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, p. 289. Johnson goes on to say that ‘if we were transplanted to the Isles of the Blessed, where there is no need of anything (or if we were gods, whose only activity is contemplation), we would see this—plants and animals would be valuable to us as objects of contemplation and beauty, and not because we could use them to serve our needs and interests . . . Philosophy . . . is a kind of biophilia, which loves and delights in natural objects and their causes’ (p. 290). Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.VII, 1177a12-19, and the discussion in Christopher Shields, *Aristotle*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 400–409.

21. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 1.5, 645a21-25 (translation modified).
Christian tradition there occurs something of a teleological degeneration, whereby the purpose and worth of nature are understood to be dependent on its purpose and worth for human beings, all according to divine intention.\textsuperscript{22} The basic argument can be freely reconstructed as follows:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Platonism/Christianity insists that the \textit{telos} of creatures is external to them; their ends are not their own but are imposed on them by another.
\item Value is ascribed in relation to ends, as in the case of a chair: the purpose of a chair is to be support for sitting; it is a good chair to the extent that this purpose is realised.
\item Hence, the value of living creatures too is ascribed in relation to the purposes they have, which are externally imposed on them.
\item Christianity teaches that the fundamental purpose of other creatures is to serve the material needs of human beings, which underwrites a pervasive axiological anthropocentrism.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{enumerate}

This kind of argument, however, fails to give due attention to a number of transitions that occurred in early modern philosophical thinking on these issues, specifically with regard to teleology and our relation to non-human creatures. According to the received narrative, there is a continuous line of teleological anthropocentrism running from early Christianity to our own time, which is used to justify a ruthless attitude to nature. Arguably, however, a rather sharp break occurs in this line with early modern philosophers, such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650). At least they clearly saw themselves as \textit{breaking} the previous Christian tradition precisely with respect to its understanding of teleology and of nature, and as ushering in a new approach to human knowledge of the natural world.\textsuperscript{24} They well understood that the earlier focus on the teleological structure of nature gave rise to an understanding of human knowledge that premiered the theoretical and contemplative, as opposed to the useful. ‘Research of final causes’, Bacon quipped, ‘is a barren thing, or as a virgin consecrated to God [i.e. entirely unproductive].’\textsuperscript{25} And more soberly: ‘It is also not bad to distinguish four causes: Material, Formal, Efficient, and Final. But of these the Final is a long way from being useful; in fact it actually distorts the sciences except in the case of human actions.’\textsuperscript{26}

And Descartes continues in the same vein: ‘They [the principles of the new physics] made me see that it is possible to achieve knowledge which would be \textit{very useful} for life

\textsuperscript{22} E.g., Johnson, \textit{Aristotle on Teleology}, p. 291.
\textsuperscript{23} Johnson’s own account includes other schools of thought involved in this kind of anthropocentrism as well, notably the Stoics.
\textsuperscript{24} For lucid discussion of this general development, see Peter Harrison, \textit{The Territories of Science and Religion} (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2015); Simon Oliver, \textit{Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed} (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), chap. 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Francis Bacon, \textit{Advancement of Learning}, Book III, chap. 5 (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1900).
\textsuperscript{26} Francis Bacon, \textit{The New Organon}, Book II, aphorism II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
and that, in place of the speculative philosophy that is taught in the Schools, it is possible to find a *practical* philosophy by which . . . [we can] make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature.27 These well-known quotes can be taken as illustrative of the fact that many early modern philosophers self-consciously rejected not just Aristotle’s conception of natural ends and contemplative knowledge, but the subsequent Christian tradition as well, which they (rightly) saw as continuous with Aristotle on these issues.28

What motivated this modern rejection of natural teleology? Metaphors such as ‘dissecting’, ‘mastering’ or ‘captivating’ notwithstanding, early modern philosophers did not envision humanity’s relation with the natural world as one of greedy ruthlessness, and in view of the all too easy caricaturing of ‘Western modernity’ it is probably well to note this. Rather, what they sought was a knowledge of nature that would be practically useful in ameliorating the ‘human estate’, an understanding of the causal operations of nature that would allow us to harness it for human good, such as better crops and physical health. Indeed, this pursuit was justified by the biblical command to charity.29 And if such amelioration is the task at hand, it does make sense to eschew the previous focus on teleological structures in favour of a practical knowledge of causes that could be manipulated by human ingenuity.30

The point is that the rejection of Aristotelian scholasticism on the part of early modern philosophers was undertaken in self-conscious critique of the previous Christian focus on contemplation of the teleological structure of the world. This was ‘the revenge of Martha upon Mary . . . the triumph of modern pragmatism over the contemplationism of the Greco-Christian tradition’, as the French historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson puts it.31

The changed conception of knowledge, moreover, coincided with the triumph of mechanism as a philosophy of nature—and therefore with the rejection of natural teleology for ‘scientific’ reasons. Mechanistic philosophy involved a new understanding of matter as inert corpuscular bits, moved by forces external to them on the model of a machine or artefact. It is characteristic of machines that they are designed by an intelligence external to the machine itself. This is one reason modern natural theology—*physico-theology*—became so influential at the time; the nature-machine suggested a Designer. For our purposes, the important thing to note is that mechanistic philosophy did not imply a rejection teleology as such. Rather, it was happy to affirm that material

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27. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clark (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 44; emphasis mine.
28. I am well aware that ‘modernity’ includes more than this ‘break’ with Aristotelian teleology; the Cambridge Platonists and later Romanticism, for instance, complicate the story. However, in an important sense the kind of philosophy of science represented by Bacon and Descartes became dominant in the trajectory of empirical science, particularly the vigorous rejection of a natural intrinsic teleology.
29. Harrison, *Territories of Science and Religion*, chap. 5. Cf. Descartes’ explicit motivation in the passage cited above.
30. Still, in retrospect there is no principled reason an investigation into efficient causality could not have co-habited happily with a continued emphasis on the contemplative knowledge of final causes, as argued by Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin*, p. 30.
31. Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin*, p. 23.
parts are ordered to each other in marvellous ways and that the whole of it could be seen as ordered towards human needs. However, from a mechanistic point of view it makes no sense whatsoever to say that purposes or ends are *intrinsic* to natural organisms themselves; rather, they must be located in the mind of the designer and are hence external. This is the inversion of the Aristotelian vision. Aristotle had suggested that art imitates nature; the new natural philosophy seemed to be saying instead that nature imitates art.\(^\text{32}\) For, like works of art, works of nature have their ends externally imposed on them.

It is with mechanism, then, that the constellation of ideas needed to effect the evacuation of intrinsic ends lamented by Johnson, White, and other eco-critical thinkers were finally in place. Mechanism and the rejection of intrinsic teleology combine perfectly with the new pragmatic understanding of human knowledge, to be proved by its usefulness to human beings. Henceforth, the business of scientific knowledge can be understood as the attempt to figure out the mechanistic causes of things so as to be able to manipulate and improve; as for final ends, they need not figure in our knowledge of the natural world, since they are not part of natural things themselves.

But what about the claim that the early Christian appropriation of Aristotelian teleology had already exchanged his *intrinsic* conception for an *extrinsic* one?\(^\text{33}\) What must be critically examined in this claim is the seductively simple opposition between extrinsic and intrinsic teleology, firmly entrenched in the debate at least since Immanuel Kant made it central to his analysis, because this neat conceptual opposition tends to mislead our understanding of the main premodern Christian position, which characteristically blended extrinsic and intrinsic elements in its understanding of teleology.\(^\text{34}\) The temptation is to see any reference to a Creator as automatically evacuating the intrinsic ends of created things themselves, as if all theology were proto-mechanistic with regard to created things. When external and internal conceptions of teleology are seen through this lens as mutually exclusive, one cannot but misread the mainstream premodern Christian position, as I shall demonstrate below with reference to the theology of Maximus the Confessor.

However, even granted that the early Christian appropriation of teleology was not simply extrinsic, and that the rejection of intrinsic teleology is a rather modern tendency, surely it is true that even premodern theologians thought of the created world in ‘anthropocentric’ terms. In other words, if our problem is really anthropocentrism, then surely its roots are to be found in the anthropocentrism of Christian thinking as such, irrespective of the technical fine points of teleological conceptions. The question here is not whether this or that early Christian thinker gave voice to an unhealthy ‘axiological

\(^{32}\) Cf. Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 113–20. Descartes explicitly equates artefacts and organisms: ‘I do not recognize any distinction between artifacts and natural bodies except that the operations of artefacts are for the most part performed by mechanisms which are large enough to be easily perceivable by the senses.’ *Principles*, I, quoted in Hanby, *No God, No Science?*, p. 118.

\(^{33}\) I leave to one side the debate about whether Aristotle’s teleology really is quite so exclusively intrinsic as Johnson argues, and focus instead on its Christian appropriation. For a critical discussion of this general question, see Simon Oliver, ‘Aquinas and Aristotle’s Teleology’, *Nova et VETERA*, English edn, 11.3 (2003), pp. 849–70.

\(^{34}\) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 321–47; cf. Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, p. 34.
antropocentrism’; rather, as White clearly perceived, we are concerned here with the conceptual logic at the very origin of Christianity: Has Christian theology from the very start been involved in an antropocentrism hindering it from perceiving the intrinsic good of other creatures?

When the question is formulated in this way a rather brief response can be given. It all hangs upon how ‘antropocentrism’ is conceived and what consequences follow. It is true that there is an antropocentrism of sorts in much premodern Christian tradition, but it tends to operate within what we might call an ‘aesthetic paradigm’ as opposed to the ‘engineering paradigm’ of much modern philosophy. That is to say, the main purpose of other living organisms for human beings is not perceived to be their material utility, but their spiritual and aesthetic value: the fact that creation manifests the glory and wisdom of God and as such is able to impart wisdom to human beings and to lead them towards the Creator. In the famous words of Augustine: ‘Then they [created things] lifted up their mighty voices and cried, “He made us!” My questioning was my attentive spirit, and their reply, their beauty.’

In other words, an earlier theology assumed the semiotic pregnancy of creation; it was to be read for the truth and wisdom behind the surface, much as the Scriptures were read with an eye to their symbolic meaning. Such an ordering of creation to human needs—call it ‘antropocentrism’—is to be seen as pedagogical; it is a very different thing from claiming that non-human nature is primarily there for our material use. It is entirely logical, therefore, that when modern thinking rejects this semiotic cosmology in favour of a mechanistic one the pragmatic knowledge-is-power-paradigm rises to prominence and the ancient contemplationism recedes.

When the purpose of natural things for human beings can no longer be seen to reside in their symbolic or communicative power, in their ability to speak of or manifest the wisdom and goodness of God and instruct in wisdom, their purpose can more easily be thought of in terms of material sustenance alone. This marries well with the modern mechanistic evacuation of intrinsic teleology in favour of an externally imposed design-structure, making it possible to argue that our relation to nature should be one of power instead of contemplation, figuring out how it works so as to serve our own (God-given) material ends. All of this strongly suggests, pace Johnson and White, that the truly decisive shift in teleological perspective—from an eco-critical point of view—occurs not

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35. Augustine, Confessions X.6.9, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 1997). For a particularly influential case in point, see Basil the Great, Hexaemeron I.5-7. A similar case can be made with respect to the use of natural philosophy for pagan philosophers, for whom the study of nature was certainly seen as morally useful. Peter Harrison writes: ‘An emphasis on the utility of the sciences has always been part of their justification, but . . . what counts as utility changes over time. The modern period will witness the beginning of an inversion of the priorities of Simplicius, when technological applications and the affairs of daily life begin to take precedence over moral edification.’ Harrison, Territories of Science and Religion, p. 32.

In fairness to White, it should be noted that he saw that this aesthetic sensibility was prevalent in the Christian East, and detected it also in St Francis of Assisi, even as he contended that the fundamental logic of Christian belief was dangerously antropocentric.

36. Cf. Oliver, Creation, p. 114.
with the Christian appropriation of Aristotle with its putative rejection of intrinsic natural ends, nor indeed with anthropocentric conceptions as such; the shift occurred, rather, with the modern mechanist and pragmatic rejection of Aristotle and the earlier Christian tradition, which no longer had use for intrinsic teleology and its contemplation.

If the argument so far holds, namely that Christian tradition generally did not reject Aristotelian intrinsic teleology in favour of extrinsic purposes, and if it did not reject the related contemplative ideal of knowledge that so agitated many modern philosophers, then we would do well to return to early Christian theology with these questions in mind to see if it does not in fact contain surprising resources for the greening of ethics. In doing so we must investigate how early theology did envision the intertwining of extrinsic and intrinsic conceptions of teleology, as well as the possibility of a contemplative relation to nature—the ability to perceive a semiotic pregnancy beyond the practically useful. In what follows, I shall look in more depth at one particularly influential historical figure and his approach to these issues, with an eye to the potential such an approach may hold for ecological ethics.

**Maximus the Confessor and the Contemplation of Nature**

Within the complex tapestry of patristic theology, I focus on Maximus the Confessor (580–662) for several reasons: Maximus’s theological vision has been recognised as ‘the completion and full maturity of Greek, mystical, and philosophical thought’. His continuous standing as a spiritual teacher in the Orthodox Church is confirmed by the large section devoted to his works in *The Philokalia*. Moreover, this standing is related to the perception of Maximus as the one who finally defeats the Origenist tendency to denigrate material reality. Hans Urs von Balthasar goes so far as to describe him as ‘the most world-affirming thinker of all the Greek Fathers’. He then goes on to relate this affirmation to the vindication of Aristotelian metaphysics, in so far as it ‘preserve[s] the rights of nature against the rampages of an unchecked supernaturalism . . . anticipating [Aquinas’s] concern to preserve the essence of each thing’. In other words, Maximus is involved, though in a different register, in the same sort of discussion that we have been considering in Aristotle, namely, the integrity of each living thing in virtue of having its own form and telos.

Among all the concepts that early Christian theologians baptised and appropriated from Greek philosophy, few are as central as *logos*. It was Origen (c. 185–253/254) who

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37. Quoted in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. xi.
38. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley, SJ (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 61. But see the qualifying remarks in Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1–3.
39. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 71.
40. Partly for these reasons, Maximus’s thinking has enjoyed something of a renaissance among contemporary theologians, not least in relation to ethics and ecology. See Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor*, pp. 324–28.
first fused the Platonic notion of transcendent archetypes with the Stoic notion of immanent *sperrmatikoi logoi* in an understanding of divine creation. The many *logoi*, which are the principles of constitution of each created thing, their inner essence and original purpose, all inhere in the one divine *Logos*, through whom everything was made, according to the Gospel of John.\(^{41}\) In the hands of Evagrius of Pontus (346–399) this is incorporated into a teaching about prayer and the three stages in the spiritual life: ascetical practice, contemplation of nature, and mystical theology. Natural contemplation, which is what I will be primarily concerned with here, involves an awareness of the *logoi* of each thing, that which it most truly is—the expression of God within creation.

But it is Maximus who gives the teaching about the *logoi* its most subtle expression. In the famous *Ambiguum 7*, Maximus lays out his understanding in some detail.\(^{42}\) The context of his reflections is a polemic against Origenist notions which ‘derived largely from the doctrines of the Greeks’ and according to which human embodied creation represented something of a fall from an original unity with the divine.\(^{43}\) Maximus wants to show, to the contrary, that created being, even in its sensible forms, is an expression of divine will and a reflection of divine nature.

Maximus states that everything created moves towards an end [τέλος], and quotes an Aristotelian sentence approvingly: ‘The end is that for the sake of which all things exist; it, however, is for the sake of nothing.’\(^{44}\) In other words, all things but the end itself exist in motion towards that end (which is not in motion towards an end since it is itself that very end—God): ‘It belongs to beings . . . to be moved toward that end which has no beginning [τὸ πρὸς τέλος ἀναρρήχον κινηθῆναι].’\(^{45}\) Put differently, Maximus simply claims that God gives to each created thing both its existence or beginning [ἀρχῆ] and its movement towards God as its ultimate end [τέλος]; God establishes the teleology of creatures. But is this, then, not exactly the kind of externally imposed ends that Johnson depleores, a theological hijacking of intrinsic purposes? To see why this is not so, it is crucial to understand the Maximian *logos*-cosmology. In a key section of *Ambiguum 7* he puts it as follows:

Who—knowing that it was *with reason* and wisdom that God brought beings *into existence* out of nothing—if he were carefully to direct the contemplative power of his soul [τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς θεωρητικὸν] to their infinite natural differences and variety, and with the analytical

\(^{41}\) See David Bradshaw, ‘The Logoi of Beings in Greek Patristic Thought’, in J. Chryssavgis and B. Foltz (eds), *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 9–14.

\(^{42}\) Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). I quote the Greek text as well as the translation from this edition, unless otherwise stated, but indicate also the column/section designations of the *Patrologia Graeca* edition, of which Constas’s is a revised version.

\(^{43}\) *Ambiguum 7* (PG 91: 1069A, Constas, p. 77). Balthasar calls *Ambiguum 7* ‘perhaps the only important anti-Origenist document in Greek patristic literature . . . managing . . . to overcome its weaknesses from within’. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 127.

\(^{44}\) *Ambiguum 7* (PG 91: 1072C, Constas, pp. 82–83).

\(^{45}\) *Ambiguum 7* (PG 91: 1073B, Constas, pp. 85–87).
Let us unpack this rather densely phrased section. First, given that each created thing is created out of non-being through the one divine Logos, indeed, after the archetype of the Logos, and given that created things are so marvellously diverse and different from each other, each having its own logos, we must say that the many logoi inhere in or participate in the one Logos. Maximus is here restating the early Jewish and Christian understanding of the Platonic schema, according to which the ideas (or archetypes or paradigms) pre-exist their creation in time in the transcendence of the divine mind. Before actually existing in time, each thing exists potentially and eternally as a divine idea—as one of the logoi of the divine Logos.

Second, all things therefore stand in a twofold relation to the divine Logos, namely as their beginning and their end; the divine Logos is both the creative principle of all things and the telos toward which they move. But from another perspective these two senses coincide, for what is given in the beginning is the same thing as that which is realized in the end—the logos of each thing: ‘the beginning and the end are one and the same’.

46. Ambiguum 7 (PG 91: 1077C–1080B, Constas, pp. 94–97). Emphasis in the original.

47. It is important to realize that by this move early Christian thinkers not only solved a Platonic conundrum vis-à-vis the existence of the ideas, but through the doctrine of creation also rescued the sensible world from the Platonist tendency to view it as but a quasi-real shadow existence in relation to the ideas themselves. The Christian understanding of creation as the intended and beloved work of God, as well as incarnation theology, had logically to counterpose such tendencies. The anti-Origenist context of Ambiguum 7 should be seen in this light. See Andrew Louth, ‘Man and Cosmos in St. Maximus the Confessor’, in Chryssavgis and Foltz (eds), Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration, pp. 62–63.

48. On the identity of logos and telos, see further Lars Thunberg, Människan och kosmos: Maximos Bekännarens teologiska vision (Skellefteå: Artos, 1999), pp. 133–36. ‘What is, is not merely; it has, as we have seen, a vocation to realize its potentiality, which is both diverse and oriented to Christ. . . . the logoi are precisely divine intentions’ (my translation).

49. Ambiguum 7 (PG 91: 1084A, Constas, p. 103). Cf. the Aristotelian understanding of the coincidence of ‘formal’ and ‘final’ causes in living organisms in particular, an investigation that would at this point take us too far afield. For exposition and discussion, see Christopher Shields, Aristotle, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 104–109.
terminology of Maximus, the return of the image to its archetype, of the creature to its Creator, is a return to the creature’s innermost essence. Speaking of human creatures, Maximus says that ‘there is no end toward which he can be moved, nor is he moved in any other way than toward his beginning, that is, he ascends to the Logos by whom he was created’. The teleology of creatures is thus intimately related to the doctrine of creation.

Third, creatures through their very existence thus participate in God, but they also participate in God through their inherent ‘desire’ to realise the telos which is their nature, or essence, or logos. For human beings this crucially involves the free choice to live in the direction of their true telos—which is what the Christian life, to be consummated in deification, is about—but for other organisms the movement to realise their own nature is precisely a natural movement given by God.

We are now in a position to respond to the charge that the fundamental notion of purpose, as developed in the early Christian tradition, is but another way to evacuate the intrinsic telos of living organisms, and with that their intrinsic value, in favour of an externally imposed telos given by God. It should be evident that it is deeply inaccurate to say that the logoi of created things—their beginning and end—are externally imposed on them. Such criticism simply misses the decisive point that all that exists comes to be out of nothing by the creative act of God, and is what it is in virtue of its own inner essence, which is to say its own logos. There is therefore literally nothing there for God to impose this logos-structure on; rather, creatures exist and are properly themselves through their logoi, which pre-existed in the divine Logos before being ‘created at the appropriate time, in a manner consistent with their logoi [κατὰ τοὺς ἐκατέστασεν λόγους], and thus they received in themselves actual existence as beings [καθ’ ἐκατέστά τὸ εἶναι τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ’]. Put differently, there is no deeper or truer identity than that given by the logoi, through which all created things are constituted as what they most truly are. To be sure, the teloi of creatures are related to their Creator, but that does not mean that the teleology in question is non-natural in the sense that it is not entirely native to created natures. The opposition here is a false one, operating on a logic that has unfortunately led many to equate the early Christian understanding of purpose with an extrinsic teleology, somehow cancelling creatures’ own ends. But this is to stand the Maximian understanding on its head.

Apart from the logic of the position developed—the logos-cosmology’s intertwining of extrinsic and intrinsic—the proof is in the proverbial pudding, namely in the understanding of human knowledge of the natural world it promulgated and in the concrete
practices to which it gave rise. For as David Bradshaw observes, ‘the concept of the logoi of beings opens up the possibility of knowing nature in an entirely different way’.53

This new way of knowing nature is known in the Christian East as *theoria physikē* [θεωρία φυσική], most often translated as *contemplation of nature*. Early on in the Christian tradition, the notion of contemplation—or *theoria*—took on central importance, in particular in monastic spirituality. The direct intuition of God is clearly the highest form of such contemplation, known simply as *theology* [θεολογία]. To reach it, ascetical practice [πράξις] is a necessary preparation, but it is not enough. One must also cultivate a form of seeing the created world: the contemplation of nature [θεωρία φυσική]. This threefold structure of spiritual development, first theorised by Evagrius in the fourth century, through the influence of Dionysius, Cassian, Maximus and others, became a staple of monastic spirituality.54 Metropolitan Jonah Paffhausen helpfully notes that in this spiritual tradition, attention must first be directed to the self, to its purification and growth in virtue; second to the *created world* in perception of the inner essence of creatures, conjoining noetic and sensible elements; third to *God* and the qualities of God.55 As Maximus puts it:

> When the intellect practices the virtues correctly, it advances in moral understanding. When it practices contemplation, it advances in spiritual knowledge. The first leads the spiritual contestant to discriminate between virtue and vice; the second leads the participant to the inner qualities of incorporeal and corporeal things [τούς περὶ ἀσωμάτων καὶ σωμάτων λογοὺς]. Finally, the intellect is granted the grace of theology.56

While much can be said about the integration of these three elements, I shall focus on the contemplation of creatures. Maximus describes that which is to be contemplated in visible creatures as follows: ‘When the intellect is absorbed in the contemplation of things visible [τῇ τῶν ἁρματῶν θεορίᾳ], it searches out either the natural principles [τοὺς φυσικοὺς λόγους] of these things or the spiritual principles [τοὺς σημαινομένους] which they reflect, or else it seeks their original cause [αὐτὴν τὴν αἰτίαν].’57 The ‘natural principles’ of things I take to be their form and *telos*, constituting their essence and

53. David Bradshaw, ‘The Logoi of Beings in Greek Patristic Thought’, in Chryssavgis and Foltz (eds), Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration, p. 22.

54. See Blowers, Maximus the Confessor, pp. 306–307.

55. Metropolitan Jonah Paffhausen, ‘Natural Contemplation in St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Isaac the Syrian’, in Chryssavgis and Foltz (eds), Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration, p. 49.

56. Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de caritate* [Car.]/Four Hundred Texts on Love (PG 90: 992C), in The Philokalia: The Complete Text, Vol. II, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherring and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 69; emphasis mine. Cf. the delightful allegory that teaches the same in Maximus’s Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God, in Philokalia II, p. 163. Here, and in the following quotations, I use the English Philokalia, which is often rather loosely translated; where relevant, I provide key words and phrases from the Greek original texts upon which The Philokalia is based.

57. *Car.* (PG 90: 981D), Philokalia II, p. 64.
behaviour. The ‘spiritual principles’ I take to signify the pedagogical and moral value of these things for human beings, in accordance with the aesthetic paradigm mentioned above. And seeking their ‘original cause’ I take as an ‘invitation’ to consider the mysterious nature of existence as such, which prompts us to recognise the ultimate existential givenness of things by the Creator. In other words, contemplation recognises the true nature of things, what this may have to teach us, and the relation of each thing to its divine source.

In view of the modern downplaying of the semiotic pregnancy of the world, as we have seen, it is interesting to note that Maximus sees a close parallel between reading Scripture with an eye to its hidden and spiritual meaning and reading the world for its hidden inner meaning:

He who does not view the ritual of the law with the sense alone, but noetically penetrates every visible symbol and thoroughly assimilates the divine principle which is hidden in each, finds God in the Law . . . Again, he who does not limit his perception of the nature of visible things to what his senses alone can observe, but wisely with his intellect searches after the essence which lies within every creature, also finds God; for from the manifest magnificence of created beings he learns who is the Cause of their being.58

Contemplation of creatures is thus clearly a form of perception that is trained on the logoi of things, an attention to creatures that is able to discern what they most properly are as well as their mysterious relation to the divine source of all being.

In this way, Maximus says, a created thing ‘communicates well-being [τοῦ εὖ εἶναι μεταδίδοσιν] . . . by being contemplated’.59 Indeed, there is a sense in which natural contemplation allows human beings to function as priests of creation, as it were offering back to God the hidden spiritual depths of created things, even as they themselves are changed by this way of perceiving creation:

When . . . you have received through natural contemplation an understanding of the nature of visible things—a nature which offers through you as gifts to the Lord the divine essences dwelling within it, and presents to you, as if presenting gifts to a king, the laws that lie within it—then you are ‘magnified in the sight of all nations’.60

As a final perspective on natural contemplation, we must note that it is understood as a risky business; Maximus repeatedly warns that it should not be engaged in unless one is suitably prepared through ascetical practices of purification.61 As this is perhaps the least intuitive part of Maximus’s teaching on natural contemplation from a contemporary point of view—we tend to think that a contemplation of nature would always be beneficial to

58. Maximus, Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice, in Philokalia II, pp. 188–89.
59. Car. (PG 90: 1050C), Philokalia II, p. 101. Well-being should here be understood in the rich sense of flourishing or thriving, including participation in divine grace.
60. Various Texts, in Philokalia II, pp. 208–209. On the notion of the human vocation to cosmic mediation, see especially Thunberg, Människan och kosmos.
61. E.g. Various Texts, in Philokalia II, pp. 203–205, 225.
us—it is worth pausing at this point. Maximus presents an unusually full picture of the process in an allegorical reading of Paul stranded on the island of Malta (Acts 28:1-4).

As I take it, the storm which befell St. Paul is the weight of involuntary trials and temptations. The island is the firm unshakeable state of divine hope. The fire is the state of spiritual knowledge. The sticks are the nature of visible things. Paul gathered these with his hand, which I take to mean with the exploratory capacity of the intellect during contemplation . . . The viper is the cunning and destructive power hidden secretly in the nature of sensible things. It bites the hand, that is, the exploratory noetic activity of contemplation; and this, with the light of spiritual knowledge, as if with fire, at once destroys the destructive power that arises from the contemplation of sensible things and that attaches itself to the practical activity of the intellect.62

What is the destructive power hidden in visible things? For Maximus and his tradition there is certainly nothing evil in the nature of material and visible things as such; on the contrary, they are good as created by God. Rather, their destructive power is related to the ability of sensible images to arouse the passions and lead to inordinate attachments.63 This is not the place to enter into an exposition of the ideal of *apatheia* in Eastern monastic spirituality; suffice to say that it is not the rejection of passions as such, of emotion and delight in beauty. It is rather a rejection of the kind of passions that disturb the peaceful mind and awaken self-centredness and the anxious and greedy grasping of the ego. Such passions threaten to ruin the enterprise of natural contemplation entirely; it attaches itself to the ‘practical’ aspect of the intellect rather than the ‘theoretical’ or contemplative. In other words, it redirects the perception from the true nature and ends of created things, in their createdness and therefore relation to God, to ends related to the self—‘practical’ ends.

Put differently, true natural contemplation depends on getting oneself—one’s desires and passions and projects—somewhat out of the way, so as to be able to explore creatures in a mode of receptive delight. This is in stark contrast to the pragmatic ideal of knowledge that came to dominance in modernity, such as in Bacon and Descartes.

With this we return to the problem of teleology and anthropocentrism in ecological ethics. For it seems that just as Maximus’s *logos*-cosmology insists creatures have their own ends, even as related to their divine source, the contemplative relation to nature he envisages clearly encourages us to approach creatures in a non-anthropocentric way, attentive to their own ‘inner essence’ or *logos* rather than our own practical ends or desires.

To be sure, Maximus offers a spiritual or religious vision that is in one sense closer to Plato than to Aristotle. Yet even if the immanent *logoi* are related to the transcendent *Logos*, under the influence of Plato, Philo and Origen, Maximus is, as Balthasar observed, concerned to preserve the essence of each created thing as its own nature, and as such it is not reducible to human ends. Moreover, the practice of this spirituality hinges on the contemplative relation being precisely not practical; that is to say, it is a perception that

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62. *Various Texts*, in *Philokalia II*, p. 192.

63. ‘We should abstain from natural contemplation until we are fully prepared, lest in trying to perceive the spiritual essences of visible creatures we reap passions by mistake.’ *Various Texts*, in *Philokalia II*, p. 205.
attends to the *logoi* of created things in their own right, and as they are related to the divine source as their beginning and end. This does not mean that contemplative knowledge could have no practical implications, or that there should be no commerce between theoretical and practical knowledge. Indeed, as I have been suggesting, contemplative knowledge should lead to changes in our dealings with fellow creatures. What is at issue is cultivating a way of seeing that resists subsuming the intrinsic ends of other creatures into human ends, so often exploitative.

In patristic theology, then, the underlying metaphysics has moved, as we have seen, beyond both Plato and Aristotle, under influence from the Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation. What Aristotle called ‘the-what-it-is’—the formal cause—is now seen to exist and to be what it is by virtue of a participation not in Platonic *abstracta*, but in the creative ideas in the mind of God, especially associated with the divine *Logos*. The contemplative relation to the world that is thus cultivated undercuts the contrastive understanding of the extrinsic and the intrinsic, the transcendent and the immanent. The ‘anthropocentrism’—if that is still an appropriate term—involves is certainly not one in which human material needs justify running roughshod over the intrinsic ends of other creatures; rather it posits humanity as a microcosm and a mediator, offering creation back to God in attending to the innermost essences of creatures themselves.

**Coda: Recovering the Contemplation of Nature with Thomas Merton**

None of this is to say that we can easily appropriate the Maximian vision in our own time and place as a resource for a contemporary ethics. There are important questions still to be worked out and perhaps a need for a more critical hermeneutic of certain elements in the Eastern Orthodox tradition than I have here provided. My purpose has rather been to draw attention to recent discussions about Aristotelian teleology, and to its continuation and transformation in early Christian theology, as resources for a greening of theological ethics. Nonetheless, so as to give some indication of the way forward, I should like to end with briefly highlighting some lectures given by Thomas Merton on this theme, which have recently been published as *A Course in Christian Mysticism*. Merton is a vivid and literary example of someone committed to practising in the tradition of the contemplation of nature, while also being cognisant of the ecological crisis in the early stages of the debate.

That Merton thought the retrieval of the contemplation of nature to be of decisive importance for the spiritual life is clear: ‘the lack of *theoria physikē* is one of the things

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64. Cf. Jacob Holsinger Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 19.
65. I am thinking, in particular, of the ways in which the fundamental distinction between the sensible and the intelligible is sometimes worked out in patristic spirituality. The richest and most winsome attempt at a full-scale retrieval and articulation of a contemplative spirituality of nature for our time is probably Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
66. Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism: Thirteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*, ed. Michael N. McGregor (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).
that accounts for the stunting of spiritual growth among our monks today’. 67 He also knew that contemplation was fundamentally opposed to philosophies that prioritise the useful and the pragmatic in our relation to the natural world, and that modern life presents specific difficulties in this regard that need to be overcome if we are to attain a contemplation of nature: ‘There is a special problem of modern time, with its technology, with its impersonal, pragmatic, quantitative exploitation and manipulation of things, [it] is deliberatively indifferent to their logoi.’ 68 Any attempt to practise in the tradition of theoria physikê must therefore involve a retrieval sensitive to these contemporary challenges; it is never mere repetition of a long gone past.

In teaching the contemplation of nature, Merton first presents it as the threshold of the contemplative life. ‘This deepening by theoria physikê’, he says, ‘this grasp of the logoi, is the beginning of a mature interior contemplation.’ 69 That is to say, one who aspires to the contemplative life cannot avoid the cultivation of a contemplative relation to the natural world. It is not a bonus for those so inclined, but a necessary step. As threshold into the mystical life, the contemplation of nature is both an art and a grace given. There is a synergy between the human cultivation of an attitude and the gift of contemplation. Merton writes, ‘theoria physikê is partly mystical and partly natural. There is a manifest synergy of God and man in its action.’ 70 What he suggests is that the contemplation of nature presupposes a measure of ascetic practice. Steps need to be taken to curtail the grasping of the ego, which will otherwise get in the way.

Having stressed the ascetical dimension, Merton then drives home that what this kind of contemplation gives us to know is that all created things are good and pure, since nothing created by God is evil or impure. But that is not all: natural contemplation teaches us that created things have their own value in the eyes of God. ‘It implies’, says Merton, ‘not mere negative indifference but a positive awareness, by love, of the value of creatures, divinely given to them, placed in them by the Creator to reflect Him in them.’ 71 And on this theme one could quote him endlessly:

The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them. The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this April day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own created wisdom and his reality in them. 72

It is this combination, contemplating God in creatures and therefore the true form of the creature itself, that leads to a deep sense of respect, as illustrated in another journal entry:

67. Merton, Christian Mysticism, p. 71.
68. Merton, Christian Mysticism, p. 76; cf. p. 77. This point is helpfully unpacked in Norman Wirzba, From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), chap. 3.
69. Merton, Christian Mysticism, p. 67.
70. Merton, Christian Mysticism, p. 72.
71. Merton, Christian Mysticism, p. 75; emphasis mine.
72. Thomas Merton, When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), p. 49.
Even a wild animal merely ‘observed’ is not seen as it really is, but rather in the light of our investigation . . . I want not only to observe but to know living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor. This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in his creatures.73

From this he draws a consequence that brilliantly encapsulates the ethical import of a contemplative relation to nature: ‘Do no violence to things, to manipulate them with my ideas—to track them, to strip them, to pick something out of them my mind wants to nibble at.’74

Merton’s retrieval of the tradition of the contemplation of nature thus responds to the critique with which we began, to the effect that the Christian wedding of the intrinsic logos-structure of natural organisms to a creative transcendent source is what led to the devaluation of nature and the subjection of organisms to external ends abusive of their own intrinsic ends. Through Merton, the tradition of natural contemplation appears to be speaking the exact opposite and thus to invite us into an ancient modus of knowing, which involves radical receptivity, delight in the thing seen, and a sense of profound respect.

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73. Merton, When the Trees, p. 45.
74. Merton, When the Trees, p. 45.