

SUMMER 2018 | VOL.28 | NO.3

Religion & Liberty

ACTON INSTITUTE'S INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RELIGION,
ECONOMICS AND CULTURE



The return of nature worship

The economics of
infinity

The politics of
apocalypse

Power, people and
things in “Westworld”

EDITOR'S NOTE

John Couretas EXECUTIVE EDITOR

In early July, an Indian court issued a ruling that accorded the status of “legal person or entity” to animals in the state, saying “they have a distinct persona with corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person.” With this measure, designed to prevent cruelty to animals, justices of the Uttarakhand High Court in northern India declared that “the entire animal kingdom, including avian and aquatic ones, are declared as legal entities having a distinct persona with corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person.”

The cover story in this Summer 2018 issue of *Religion & Liberty* reports that “the drive to grant rights to the entirety of the natural world has already achieved stunning victories.” Writer Wesley J. Smith cites cases in places like Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina and more than 30 U.S. cities. The New Zealand Parliament declared the Whanganui River (pictured on our cover) to be an “integrated, living whole” possessing “rights and interests.” Smith warns that unless “we act to ensure that only human beings and our associations and enterprises are the proper subjects of rights and legal standing in courts of law – we face a darker and less prosperous human future.”

Robert J. Joustra in “The Politics of the Apocalypse” observes that “just as humans are busy now creating their own moral universes of meaning, so we are also busy making and remaking the *material* universe, the very stuff of the planet and maybe, eventually, beyond. We have become like gods, though the jury on the quality of our divinity is very much out.” A dark vision, but he concludes with a note of “hope, in the midst of troubled times.”

The issue features more thought-provoking pieces. Micah Watson weighs in on HBO’s mind-bending, techno-philosophical series “Westworld” and asks important questions about what it means to be human. Jordan J. Ballor digs into the latest Marvel blockbuster, “Avengers: Infinity War,” which reminds us that the pursuit of a neo-Malthusian vision eventually turns into worship of Molech.

In the Liberal Tradition offers a profile of Sister Mary Kenneth Keller (1913–1985), the computer science pioneer who helped develop the BASIC programming language, opening new vistas of science, engineering and wealth creation.



Cover Photo: Whanganui River, New Zealand © Felix Engelhardt

COVER STORY

13 The return of nature worship

Wesley J. Smith



FILM

03 The economics of infinity

Jordan J. Ballor



TV

18 Power, people and things in “Westworld”

Micah Watson



ESSAY

07 The politics of apocalypse

Robert J. Joustra

02 Acton Briefs

05 The tragedy of Venezuela’s socialism

06 People v. money: The flaws of democratic socialism

11 Why does the alt-right extol North Korea?

12 Sister Mary Kenneth Keller (1913 – 1985)

17 Why tariffs and protectionism make Americans poorer

21 Mexico begins its own road to hell

22 Nature, technology and Pompeii

AU and building the free society

Jenna Suchyta

ACTON INSTITUTE INTERN

Over 1,000 people flocked to Grand Rapids June 18–21 to listen to more than 80 inspiring faculty members lecture on a wide variety of topics touching on liberty, faith and free-market economics. This was the 13th renewal of Acton University, Acton's yearly four-day conference exploring the intellectual foundations of a free society. AU is all about "building the foundations of freedom" by bringing together leaders in business, ministry and development, as well as students, professors, entrepreneurs and members of the media.

Alejandro Chafuen, one of Acton's current managing directors, was at Grove City College in October to accept the Grove City College Alumni Association's Jack Kennedy Memorial Alumni Achievement Award for his substantial work in advancing the cause and research of liberty. As the *GēDUNK* put it, Chafuen and other GCC alumni seek to "build the political and intellectual infrastructure that [makes] it possible to provide voters and policy makers the means to restore the nation's compromised principles."

Building the political and intellectual infrastructure is the same work that Chafuen continues here at the Acton Institute; Acton University is one strong example. For four days, hundreds of people from all around the world gather to learn and commune with others who share their values of faith and liberty. As any retreat leader can attest, much of the fervor and excitement from being on retreat inevitably dies down when normal life returns—some people refer to this as "retreat high" or

"a mountain-top experience." While the excitement is still running high as attendees and faculty return home from our summit at DeVos Place, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the infrastructure that we have built for liberty. Where might cracks still lie in that infrastructure? Who are we reaching and who are we not? Is our message coming through less strongly in some places than others? What can we do to change that?

Alejandro Chafuen, while on the same trip to GCC in October, also addressed current students about the disproportionately vast impact that a small institution such as Grove City has on the wider liberty movement. It's about the people, Chafuen concluded, the people who, like himself, commit themselves to "contributing to freedom . . . until the day they die." Acton University 2018 is over, but the work continues.

Westminster Abbey praises God for the NHS

Noah Gould

ACTON INSTITUTE EMERGING LEADER PROGRAM

Westminster Abbey held a service in early July commemorating the 70th anniversary of the United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS). At the service, Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, said that the "NHS is the most powerful and visible expression of our Christian heritage, because it sprang out of a concern that the poor should be able to be treated as well as the rich."

Holding a service for the NHS raises two questions: Why does the Anglican Church no longer believe itself to be the "most powerful and visible expression" of the U.K.'s Christian heritage? And should the Anglican Church be holding a

service for the NHS at all?

The NHS is a Bernie Sanders-style single-payer health-care system, which means there is no upfront cost to British citizens for medical care. This system, however, comes with severe drawbacks. Whenever the state offers health care, the state must ration care. This creates a huge problem that has already manifested itself in the U.K.: When the state rations care, innocent people die.

Yet the NHS's problems are not limited to individual outliers. Compared to the health-care systems of countries with similar wealth, the NHS does an atrocious job of caring for its citizens. According to economist Kristian Niemietz of the Institute of Economic Affairs, "in international comparisons of health system performance, the NHS almost always ranks in the bottom third, on a par with the Czech Republic and Slovenia."

In his sermon, Hall quoted Aneurin Bevan, a founder of the NHS, who said, "I'm proud about the NHS. It's a piece of real socialism; it's a piece of real Christianity, too." This quote sheds light on the real issue at stake. The Anglican Church's love of the NHS does not necessarily spring from a love of the institution itself, which does not provide the best possible quality health care, but from the misconception that the only way for a Christian to care about health care is to have the government provide it. In John 21:17, Jesus tells the Apostle Peter to "feed My sheep." In this and countless other verses, Jesus taught that it is the role of the church to care for the hurting in the world. The church is the best institution to meld compassion and practical service. Hall and Welby are confusing the charity of the church with the charity of the government and diluting the power of the

church by denying its ability to minister in the world.

President Trump nominates Judge Brett Kavanaugh

Joe Carter

ACTON INSTITUTE

Three facts to know about Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh:

1. Kavanaugh, age 53, was born in Washington, D.C., and educated at Yale University (B.A.) and Yale Law School (J.D.). He previously served in private practice in Washington, D.C., and as principal deputy to the associate attorney general and acting associate attorney general, U.S. Department of Justice. Served as Associate Counsel, then Senior Associate Counsel to the President, and as an Assistant to the President and Staff Secretary to the President before being appointed by George W. Bush as a judge to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.
2. He is considered a proponent of originalism, a manner of interpreting the Constitution that begins with the text and attempts to give that text the meaning it had when it was adopted, and textualism, a method of statutory interpretation that relies on the plain text of a statute to determine its meaning.
3. While in private practice in the 1990s, he served as chair of the Federalist Society's Religious Liberties Practice Group and wrote two pro bono Supreme Court amicus briefs in support of religious liberty.



FILM

The economics of infinity

Pursuit of a neo-Malthusian vision eventually turns into worship of Molech

Jordan J. Ballor

The latest Marvel blockbuster, “Avengers: Infinity War,” has opened to popular acclaim and record-breaking box office numbers. It is truly a spectacle, and one that expands the Marvel Cinematic Universe into uncharted territory. But amid the special effects and the glamour, the plot that drives the action is an old one, and no less compelling because of its antiquity. Thanos, the Mad Titan, pursues absolute power in the form of the Infinity Gauntlet, which houses six gems whose origins lie beyond the creation of the cosmos. Thanos initially pursues this power not for its own sake but rather out of a well-intentioned but deeply misguided sense of limits of economic growth. What we find in the course of the film, however, is that the single-minded pursuit of such a pure ideological agenda always requires sacrifice.

Thanos, the zero-sum economist

Thanos was born on the planet Titan, where he grew to see that the abundance of his civilization would inevitably lead to destruction. As he puts it, “It was beautiful. Titan

was like most planets; too many mouths, not enough food to go around. And when we faced extinction, I offered a solution.” That solution was genocide, but with a Rawlsian twist: “At random. It would be fair, for rich and poor alike. They called me a madman. And what I predicted came to pass.”

These formative experiences drive Thanos to implement his solution on a cosmic scale. The logic runs like this: There is a finite amount of resources in the world (or the cosmos, in this telling), while the growth of the population is unlimited. At some point we will reach peak population, after which the abundance which had previously been enjoyed will be replaced by famine, privation and, eventually, mass extinction. The only sustainable solution from Thanos’ perspective is to purge the universe of half of its population. This would rebalance the relationship between population and resources, setting things aright and allowing for those left alive to thrive and flourish.

And the only way to implement his solution on the scale it needs to be implemented is to have absolute power, so

Photo: Thanos in the Museum of Film Legends in Prague / Fjorobica / Shutterstock.com

that with the snap of his fingers he might randomly eliminate half of the population of the entire cosmos. This is the vision Thanos has pursued throughout his life, and the one that he explains to his young, adopted (after he orphaned her) daughter, Gamora: “Little one, it’s a simple calculus. This universe is finite, its resources, finite ... if life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correcting.” This is Thanos’ neo-Malthusian vision, one expanded beyond the national or global scale, but to all of existence itself.

From Malthus to Molech

The problems with this vision are manifold. It assumes that life is by nature “unchecked,” perhaps a commentary as much on Thanos’ perception as on the reality. Nature itself provides boundaries, in the form of conscience and natural law as well as in its inherent limitations and feedback loops. If a species extends itself too far, an evolutionary logic might argue, then it will experience the natural consequences, and perhaps extinction is what it deserves. In this sense, Thanos possesses a more developed moral sensibility. His goal is actually to preserve life from the threat it presents to itself.

Thanos thus finds himself faced with a dilemma: He cannot do what is required and watch all of life cease to exist (on his assumptions), or he can act and preserve half of the cosmos’ population. He can take upon himself the mantle of savior. Here we see the neo-Malthusian logic come to its necessary conclusion. Most often in these scenarios it is the future generations that are sacrificed for the apparent needs of those who are currently alive. This may be accomplished through abortion or forms of contraception and the accompanying formation of cultural values that de-center procreation as a social good.

This is why adherence to a Malthusian vision always ends with worship of Molech. Molech, the Ammonite god of fire and death, could only be appeased by offering the children of the people as a sacrifice, a practice condemned by the Old Testament (Lev. 18:21; 20:3-5). Typically such pagan sacrifices were made to deter the wrath of the god as well as to curry its favor. The hoped-for result was a bountiful harvest and blessings for those who were fortunate enough to survive.

This dynamic of pagan sacrifice closely mirrors Thanos’ vision. In the comics,

Thanos literally worships a personified Death, which is why he pursues the complete eradication of life from the cosmos. In the cinematic version, Thanos pursues his pure agenda with religious zeal, only seeking to destroy half of those who are alive. But the basic framework is the same: His dogmatic adherence to the neo-Malthusian creed of limitation and extinction requires him to make a sacrifice, first of his own child and then of half of the entire cosmos.

A lack of imagination

Whether or not the neo-Malthusian vision is itself properly linked with its eponymous political economist, we can see why such an ideology makes for such a common and compelling motive for villainy, be it Agent Smith of “The Matrix” trilogy or Thanos in “Avengers: Infinity War.” There is the appeal to some greater good and the adamant pursuit of this good despite the consequences, which in its own twisted way can be respected as a mark of character. As Thanos tells Gamora of his neo-Malthusian truth, “I’m the only one who knows that. At least I’m the only one who has the will to act on it.”

One of the key flaws of Thanos’ ideology is its lack of imagination. As my 13-year-old son wondered upon reflecting on the film, when he achieved absolute power, why didn’t Thanos just create more resources? The power he claimed represents the opposite of the finitude and the limitations he seeks to overcome: infinity. Unless Thanos were to directly intervene to control the growth of population, simply eliminating half of the cosmos’ population would merely set the clock back and would not be itself a sustainable solution. Such a purge would need to be periodically implemented. So, if the number of people cannot be indefinitely checked, then the other part of the equation, the use and limits of needed resources, seems to be the natural factor to address.

And even if the absolute limits of natural resources could not be literally

made to be infinite, neither does Thanos acknowledge the ability of people to adapt and innovate. We have shown a remarkable ability to survive in all kinds of environments and against all kinds of challenges. Life will out, we might say. But Thanos simply cannot imagine a future in which new ways of surviving and adapting to changed economic realities might come to be.

The economist Friedrich Hayek even asserted that it was the market’s ability to overcome the logic of the neo-Malthusian population bomb that was one of its key and compelling claims to a positive moral status. As Hayek put it in the opening of *The Fatal Conceit*, “Our civilization depends, not only for its origin but also for its preservation, on what can be precisely described only as the extended order of human cooperation.”

And so it is in the limits of his own imagination that Thanos realizes his greatest captivity. This is his conceit that results in the fatality of half of the cosmos. He cannot move beyond the flawed, zero-sum framework that arose from his earliest experiences. And he cannot envision a future that is truly open to new

discoveries and new possibilities, to the discoveries that come from human interaction and ingenuity on the basis of what exists in the created order. In this Thanos is perhaps most clearly contrasted with the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the God who is himself understood to be infinite and the source of all good blessings (*fons omni-*

um bonorum), whose sacrifice of himself was made that people “may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). “Avengers: Infinity War” thus presents us with a cautionary tale about the limits of our own imaginations and the righteous zeal in pursuit of a utopian ideology. I can’t wait to see what comes next.

Jordan J. Ballor is a senior research fellow at the Acton Institute and a postdoctoral researcher in theology and economics at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam as part of the Moral Markets project. [R&L](#)

The tragedy of Venezuela's socialism

Victor Mata

The real crisis in Venezuela didn't start with the late Hugo Chavez. He and President Nicolas Maduro, a dictator in truth, are the inevitable result of more than 40 years of stable economic development combined with a steadily eroding democratic political culture. The 21st-century socialism advanced by Chavez and now Maduro is the product of four decades of corruption and a bloated bureaucracy that advanced under a democratic system that has been subverted into totalitarianism.

Venezuela started its longest democratic period in 1958, after the overthrow of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Then, until 1998, the country was led by two left-leaning political parties: the Social Democrats and the Social Christians. Venezuela sustained a strong democracy during that time, as demonstrated by the fact that its institutions, and the country's executive branch, withstood several coup d'état attempts. During this period of democracy, Venezuela built a strong economy; the fourth largest in the world by 1966 and the richest in Latin America by 1968. But this wealth was built on severe inequality. The political and business elite had forgotten the poorest and most unprotected citizens.

In 1998, the worst political crisis in recent times exploded. It was a protest against an unresponsive and corrupt administration and the unfair distribution of wealth. Two of three presidential candidates came from the non-political world: Irene Sáez, a former Miss Universe, and a military man by the name of Hugo Chavez, who was from a poor family but displayed great charisma and

leadership qualities. The third candidate was politician Henrique Salas Römer. Chavez' electoral campaign featured a strong populist theme and he campaigned on three points. First, Chavez said he represented a change for Venezuela, something different for the country. Second, he whipped up the social resentment between the rich and the poor, blaming rich people for the economic problems of poor people. It was his way to create a bond with most Venezuelans and get votes. Third, he promised to change the constitution and restructure other institutions because he said it was necessary to change the Venezuelan system and replace it with socialism.

Chavez won the election with 56 percent of the vote. When he took office in 1999, oil was priced in the \$7-\$9 per barrel range. By 2005, the price had soared to \$100. For the next decade, Chavez used the country's oil wealth like a rich kid who inherited something he never worked for. With Venezuela's petrodollars, he advanced a paternalistic state, creating social, economic and political ties through subsidies and purchasing the conscience of the poorest in Venezuela.

Until his death in 2013, Chavez set up his 21st-century socialism by subverting the democracy that allowed him to take power and stoking class warfare among the poorest in this nation of 31 million. At the same time, Chavez expropriated hundreds of companies, with most of their owners and shareholders never receiving restitution. Ever the populist, Chavez gave the control of those expropriated companies to political allies who had no qualifications or experience running businesses. This change of control over viable Venezuelan businesses and industries was probably the single most dangerous action for the country's economic future (the nation is now experiencing a negative GDP growth rate). What's more, Chavez took control of currency exchange and dictated how much and for what purpose individuals and businesses could buy and sell. Foreign trade ground to a halt in many sectors. As a result, Chavez destroyed food production in Venezuela.

Today Venezuela has what could be described as an untraditional dictatorship – it takes pains to look like a democracy. Yet it is a totalitarian system. In the words of the congressman Juan Miguel

Matheus, it is a cancer that invades each and every area of our social life. In an attempt to show how humane it is, the government recently released more than 50 political prisoners. But the destruction of basic living standards has been severe. In Venezuela, some 12 million people live on a minimum monthly mandated wage which, in April, worked out to \$1.61 on the black market exchange rate. Sociologist Maria Gabriela Ponce of the Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas estimates that 61 percent of Venezuelans are immersed in extreme poverty. More than 63 percent of Venezuelans have only one daily meal and scenes of people rummaging through the trash on the streets are common. Infant mortality rates have grown exponentially. Because there are no medical supplies or medicines in hospitals, patients with cancer, epilepsy and heart diseases, among others, needlessly die daily. Companies that produce medicine don't have American dollars to buy raw material. Malnutrition is atrocious. But it is the only possible result in a country with more than 3 million children whose futures have been ruined by 21st-century socialism.

The Venezuelan crisis today is the result of more than 40 years of corrupt government and false promises that have created a climate of extreme dependence on the government. With people totally dependent on the government, Chavez and now Maduro could manipulate people as they wanted – keeping a lid on social unrest but destroying human dignity.

Political solutions to the current crisis are not in sight. The Maduro government has divided the opposition and told the people that its opponents are of two kinds: Some are profiting by connections with politicians; the others are bloodthirsty and want to destroy democracy with a civil war. Few then have any hope of finding a politician who can unite the country. Venezuela needs new ways of thinking to restore true democracy. It needs a new generation of political leaders with strong moral character who understand how socialism corrodes and corrupts human dignity.

Venezuelan lawyer Victor Mata is participating in Acton's summer 2018 Emerging Leaders Program. He begins his master's degree in global public policy this fall at University of Potsdam in Germany. [R&L](#)

BRIEF

JUSTICE KENNEDY ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Joe Carter ACTON INSTITUTE

Over the years, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy often served as a “swing vote” and sided with the court’s liberal faction. For this reason, many conservatives (including me) are relieved to be able to replace him on the high court.

Yet there was one area of jurisprudence on which Kennedy was consistently praiseworthy: freedom of speech. A study conducted in 2013 showed that Kennedy was significantly more willing to find a First Amendment violation than the Court as a whole.

In honor of Justice Kennedy’s retirement, here are four quotes from him on free speech:

1. *International Society for Krishna Consciousness v. Lee*: “The First Amendment is often inconvenient. But that is beside the point. Inconvenience does not absolve the government of its obligation to tolerate speech.”

2. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*: “First Amendment freedoms are most in danger when the government seeks to control thought or to justify its laws for that impermissible end. The right to think is the beginning of freedom, and speech must be protected from the government because speech is the beginning of thought.”

3. *Citizens United v. FEC*: “Speech is an essential mechanism of democracy, for it is the means to hold officials accountable to the people. The right of citizens to inquire, to hear, to speak, and to use information to reach consensus is a precondition to enlightened self-government and a necessary means to protect it.”

4. *NIFLA v. Becerra*: “Governments must not be allowed to force persons to express a message contrary to their deepest convictions. Freedom of speech secures freedom of thought and belief. This law imperils those liberties.”

ESSAY

People v. money

The flaws of democratic socialism

Victoria Antram

“This race is about people versus money,” said 28-year-old Democratic Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who usurped the nomination from high-ranking House Democrat, John Crowley, on June 26. Her viral campaign video also accused the reigning King of Queens of not breathing the same air or drinking the same water as his constituents. Very few expected Ocasio-Cortez’s grassroots movement to topple Crowley’s Wall Street-funded political machine.

“People versus money” is the anthem of anti-establishment candidates. As the Left moves farther left, it is a song voters hear on repeat. Ocasio-Cortez’s nomination reveals just how catchy the tune first popularized by Senator Bernie Sanders is. “Medicare for all, tuition-free public college, and federal jobs guaranteed,” they chant. However, the Democratic Socialist’s paradigm is flawed. In advocating for socialized health care and education, they have neglected to account for monetary costs and the reality of human nature.

As the old economic adage goes, “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” For instance, a report produced by the nonpartisan Urban Institute analyzing Sanders’ single-payer health care plan predicted that total federal spending would increase by \$32 trillion in a ten-year span. This number represents the federal government’s absorption of state and local government, employer and household spending on health care. This tremendous increase in government spending would correspond to a tax too hefty to be politically palatable.

Similarly, the championing of free

public college is a mirage for another high tax that would ultimately diminish the value of education to what the public is willing to collectively invest. If the past is any predictor, the cost of college will continue to rise as more federal dollars are funneled in. Coupled with increased demand, the cost of higher education would exponentially grow and strain public budgets.

The new Queen of Queens assumes that money left in the hands of private individuals leads to greed and marginalization, so it is safest in the hands of the bureaucrats in Washington. A romanticized administrative state purged of self-interest underlies this assumption. Economic thinkers from Frederic Bastiat to Albert Jay Nock have deemed taxes, especially at the magnitude proposed by Democratic Socialists, to be “legal plunder.” In *The Law*, Bastiat describes this phenomenon as “law benefit[ing] one citizen at the expense of another by doing what the citizen himself cannot do without committing a crime.” The expanded state required for Democratic Socialist policies deliberately violates people’s private economic liberty by cultivating a “monopoly of crime.” Maybe the victorious self-proclaimed “working-class candidate” should reconsider the value of the working people’s economic liberty before demanding a greater share of their paycheck.

In her campaign video, Ocasio-Cortez asserts that she “was born in a place where zip code determines your destiny.” Yet last Tuesday Ocasio-Cortez became one step closer to defying her own maxim. The same characteristics she exhibited in this feat – creativity, ingenuity and hard work – are the same that individuals demonstrate when they choose work over welfare. In decrying the plunder of taxes, Bastiat praises people’s God-given faculties that when applied to the world’s natural resources promote a common good superior to that promised by government.

“People versus money” does not always have to mean Wall Street. The government has proven to be an unreliable steward of people’s money. Have you checked out the U.S. Debt Clock lately?

Victoria Antram is pursuing a master’s degree in politics at Hillsdale College’s Van Andel Graduate School of Statesmanship. [R&L](#)

ESSAY

The politics of apocalypse

Robert J. Joustra

“Disarmageddon” is what *The Economist* earlier this year called “complacent, reckless leaders” who “have forgotten how valuable it is to restrain nuclear weapons.” The politics of nuclear weapons – deterrence doctrines, mutually assured destruction and so on – have been the obsessive stuff of international politics since the Manhattan Project. There is, as Alissa Wilkinson and I argue in our 2015 book *How to Survive the Apocalypse*, something unique about the nuclear age, in which it becomes terrifyingly clear that human beings could end up as authors of their own destruction. The *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* has run a clock on the odds, a literal Doomsday Clock, since 1947.

Debates in religious communities have run hot over things like nuclear weapons, regarding not only the use of them (which most are absolutely against) but also the possession of them. The anxiety that we have spent the last 60 years or so in creating the architecture of our own destruction is hard to miss. But nuclear weapons are just the tip of the iceberg of the politics of apocalypse, the most visible and spectacular perhaps, but a piece of a plague of fears and uncertainties about what it means to be human and whether the systems and institutions of our design have not, in some way, changed or challenged basic aspects of our humanity. Underneath tongue-in-cheek headlines like “Is Google Making You Stupid?” or the addictive isolation of Instagram posturing is a kind of technological pessimism that shows our scientific optimism of the post-war period is running



out of steam. We have made marvels, great and terrible, and now that our machines are loose upon the world, like Frankenstein, we have a moment of real pause about whether we might have gone too far and whether we can still control the devices of our making – or if they now control us.

Many technologies are, of course, new and so we sometimes suffer socially from the kind of lapses in memory that come from our progressive and presentist worldview; that our problems are not like anything in history and all of history has been a long story of progress to produce us. But like nuclear weapons, technology itself is only a manifestation – albeit often a concentrated one – of the underlying anxieties embedded in the “modern moral order.” The “problem” of our age, pundits are often apt

Photo: Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse / Rusty / iStockphoto.com



to wax, is “technology” (kids on their *phones*) or, of late, “late-stage liberalism” (*kids on their phones*) or some other feature of modern life whose intensification has undermined or challenged our humanity. In fact, these social and political manifestations are older than we usually recognize. Alissa and I draw out three pathologies of the modern moral order, a sort of unholy trinity around which our politics of apocalypse often gravitates: (1) individualism and authenticity, (2) consequentialism and (3) the loss of freedom.

Individualism, authenticity and you

Philosopher Charles Taylor calls the decisive shift in the modern moral order an *anthropocentric turn*, by which he means a kind

of optionality that emerges for people about whether and what to believe. *Human beings* become the center of this universe, not gods or God or a cosmic hierarchy of whatever, but people themselves who have existential choices of real weight to make about who they are, what they will become and what they are for. Not coincidentally, just as this turn was happening in hearts and minds, human beings were also busy building the bulwarks of what would become the *anthropocene*, what scientists as well as social scientists could describe as a period on the planet when human activity has become the dominant influence. These are hardly unrelated. Just as humans are busy now creating their own moral universes of meaning, so we are also busy making and remaking the material universe, the very stuff of the planet and maybe, eventually, beyond. We have become like gods, though the jury on the quality of our divinity is very much out.

Of course, a number of new problems are raised in this kind of a universe, especially for the very young. Without the backdrop of history and tradition, it is difficult for individuals to situate themselves in a cosmos derived of obvious meaning. It is as though, leaning on generations of science, history and theology we cut the ladder out from under the next generation and asked them what they think being human means. But we are creatures of metaphor, of modeling and of mimicking; it is hard to know how to behave or how to live without these sources. We are told to be authentic to ourselves, to take the road less traveled, to bracket our parents and our upbringing and to find out what is most true to ourselves. Yet most of us seem to have found this isolating and even disempowering rather than empowering.

There is always a backdrop of society, history and tradition, even if we try to ignore or fight against it. Even our petty rebellions are fueled by our intellectual, spiritual and biological parents. There is no escaping them. There is also, in a more profound sense, no escaping certain laws of nature and human life. We can make what we want of our moral universe, but certain behaviors eventually degrade and destroy. “Love is love” may be the chant of our sexual liberation, but nature is totally indifferent to our trivial revolts. The fecundity of childbearing and birth obeys laws we cannot change.

Has technological revolution fueled and intensified the drive to authenticity? I certainly think it has, but it has hardly created the drive or the fragmentation of individualism. It has, at best, been a catalyst of certain underlying assumptions – like authenticity – written into our machines and their programs. It has enabled and extended this drive, but the crisis of authenticity did not arrive with Instagram. Instagram intensified and enlarged and then made money off it.

Consequentialism and the crisis of ethics

The political and social problems with individualism and authenticity have been catalogued aplenty, but at least one of them is the crisis of ethics that emerges in a universe of individual meaning makers. It is a question of not only *what* to believe or live for but also *how* we should get there.

At least part of the problem with late-stage liberalism is that the ground rules of social engagement atrophy under the weight of successively individual universes. What, after all, is a common life if it is predicated only on everyone being able to pursue, as far as they are able, what they believe to be their own, authentic way of being and living? Can social and political

bonds survive this kind of fragmentation, and even if they could, how do we adjudicate when those moral universes conflict? This is not merely a philosophical question, of course. The limits of pluralism are probably at the heart of contemporary debates over immigration, trade, globalism and so on. Communities that have, or feel they have, defined ends and ethics are increasingly alarmed by the prospect of inducting members who they do not believe share either those ends or those ethics. It is one thing to say we may have different views of the good life and the ends to which human life is aimed. It is quite another to say our views diverge so widely that we no longer agree on the ground rules around which people of plural perspectives can meaningfully engage or live.

This is also what political scientists call the Rule of Law. And the legal sphere has been very busy trying to somehow make sense of the moral tangle that individualism and consequentialism have made. In its most radical form (which rarely occurs, I think), an anthropocentric worldview that places the self and its meaning at the center presumably does not need also to adopt a social ethics that validates and makes space for other people pursuing their own meaning and ends. In other words, we end up with an ethics of ends, of consequences, not of means, and those ends are defined often on the basis of what is true for me, for my self-actualization.

Why should someone else's view or life interfere with my actualization and authenticity? Only the coercive power of the increasingly illegitimate state can force concessions to others, but no state in the world is so powerful that it can enforce pluralism on a wide scale. Most political com-

munities, to survive, need day-to-day assent from their members, including on basic things like legitimacy.

A political and social ethics of consequentialism, what achieves my or our ends without much fuss about means, now seems to culturally dominate American public life. Anything outside of the person, including potentially other people, becomes so much grist for the mill of self actualization. Nobody and nothing are intrinsically owed anything, except perhaps if I voluntarily contract or opt into an arrangement (which raises trouble for communities we are born into without our consent, including states and families). Again, our machines intensify and extend but hardly invent this logic. Cyber-utopians imagined that digital spaces would create a new, wider venue for pluralism to take flight. In some cases, this may have happened. But our alarm is now focused on the kind of digital cul-de-sacs in which radicalization of groups is the rule and social ethics is the collateral damage. We are beginning to lose not only civility but also the skill of disagreement. Locked into a kind of evolutionary fight-or-flight in our public life, technologies have embedded

and extended this pathology of the modern moral order.

The loss of freedom

For half a century the debate has raged on about who was right, Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, twin 20th-century dystopias of modern society long predicted a century earlier by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. The political temptations generated by individualism and consequentialism have long run along the gambit of two broad options: tyranny, or the enforcement of a kind of civil-religious order that precludes pluralism outside the boundary of state-defined limits, or fragmentation, also a kind of tyranny in which citizens opt out of larger social and political concerns.

This, some have been arguing, is endemic of the larger trajectory of liberalism. Since it does not itself, by design, sustain or project a kind of existential ordering of virtues for a free society, it depends on a citizenry being formed in other places to value the things it uses to generate the rule of law: fairness, tolerance, decency, modesty, patience, so on. But when it is no longer clear that the individual moral universes of citizens, or the moral universes of welcomed strangers, can generate or sustain these virtues in the long run, then the political order buckles and fractures until it becomes a kind of empty proceduralism, a facilitator

with constantly contested limits, of individual desire.

This is an overly dire picture of late-stage liberalism, in my opinion, but also a rather fashionable one that alerts us to a key feature of the politics of apocalypse: It is hard to chart a different course from either fragmentation and fracture or tyranny

“Nobody and nothing are intrinsically owed anything, except perhaps if I voluntarily contract or opt into an arrangement (which raises trouble for communities we are born into without our consent, including states and families). Again, our machines intensify and extend but hardly invent this logic.”

and coercion. Depending on which pundits you favor, we are very busy tracking either one of those courses, and in fact both are probably on some level right. In some respects, our systems and institutions are enlarging fracture and fragmentation, while in others the state is enlarging itself in an act of self-protection to prevent a pluralism so wide that it can no longer tolerate the state or its presumed values.

Not accidentally, in both Orwell's and Huxley's worlds, technology was a key facilitator. It did not invent the human vices that were magnified and globalized, but these societies would also not be possible without the ability to control information, redact and modify it, alter human reproduction (a key in both dystopias), inhibit and channel desire, and so on. The underlying anxiety in this loss of freedom is not only that the systems and machines of our design might have politics themselves embedded within them, but that the power and scale of those systems and machines means we mere mortals may no longer be able to escape them.

How to be human in the anthropocene

The magnifying element that technology plays in the modern moral order is not that somehow these problems are endemic or original to technological societies. Rather, it is that we have designed systems and machines of such extraordinary power and scale that we are no longer able to get outside of the problems endemic to them. We are, in other words, trapped in a kind of deterministic cycle, not unable by human nature to overcome certain kinds of problems, but unable now because of the systems and machines we inherit to resolve certain basic problems of the modern moral order.

This, at least, is somewhat original to our age. Worldviews and societies rise and fall through human history, but this is the first time we may take the planet with us. This is what we mean by the politics of apocalypse. Being human in the anthropocene raises the stakes on our common life in a way that is at least unusual in human history. There are certain mistakes we can only make once, as the Doomsday Clock ticks on.

But we must also not be one-sided in our telling of these politics. Apocalypse is not merely a watchword for punishing, global catastrophe. Catastrophe, indeed, is usually a feature of any apocalypse worthy of its name, but the Greek root of it is the same as the last word of the Christian New Testament: Revelation. As humankind struggles with its apocalyptic powers, it struggles to understand its place in the cosmos, the true meaning of not

only our individual lives and struggles but also that of human life as a whole. The real meaning of Revelation is not destruction, but comfort. The book under that name was written to Christians badly in need not of the kind of pessimism porn that casually dominates our media. They, like us, knew about their problems. That book was written to reveal the true nature and dignity of life, to pull back the curtain of uncertainty and offer the comfort of a Kingship whose reign has already begun and whose completeness we await.

To be human in the anthropocene is to be attentive to the double edge of the politics of apocalypse. Yes, there is the anxiety, the fear, the uncertainty—the stakes we have made and are making in our world. But there is also the cross pressure of a missing, longed-for revelation of comfort and hope. Our machines may be mighty, but they are not Almighty. And the recovery of that humility also brings us hope in the midst of troubled times.

“There are certain mistakes we can only make once, as the Doomsday Clock ticks on.”

Robert J. Joustra (Ph.D., University of Bath) is the editor of the Public Justice Review at the Center for Public Justice and founding director of the Center for Christian Scholarship at Redeemer University College (Toronto, Canada), where he also teaches politics and international studies. He is the author, with Alissa Wilkinson, of How to Survive the Apocalypse and The Religious Problem with Religious Freedom: Why Foreign Policy Needs Political Theology. [R&L](#)

P L E A S E S A V E T H E D A T E

ACTON
INSTITUTE

Annual Dinner

OCT. 17, 2018



Why does the alt-right extol North Korea?

Rev. Ben Johnson

North Korea may seem like an odd choice for a white nationalist's utopia, but then these are odd times. A significant portion of the alt-right has become enchanted with, or at least willing to defend, the world's foremost bastion of Stalinism. In North Korea, racialists believe they have spied a model of their own nationalism, anti-Americanism and hatred of free enterprise.

"North Korea is the only ethno-nationalist state opposing the current world order, and as long as it exists, it will stand as an example (and a possible future ally) for ethnic and racial nationalists everywhere, especially those of us in the West who see the only hope for our people in the destruction of the current world order," writes Greg Paulson at the online journal *Counter Currents*, which styles itself an intellectual powerhouse of the alt-right.

Appreciation for North Korea has spread in recent years. Matthew Heimbach, an organizer of the Charlottesville rally who was released from jail recently for a separate assault, said that "North Korea is a nation that stands against imperialism and globalism around the world." And he believes it does so on racial grounds. "The very identity of the nation comes from an actual national socialist perspective, specifically also deriving elements from Japanese fascism."

The assessment borrows from B. R. Myers' book *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters*, which says the 35-year-long Japanese occupation led Koreans to organize society around their own racially superior self-image.

Hence, North Korea's birth as an alt-right symbol of the resistance. David Duke, who is regarded as an elder statesman by the racist right, has offered support ranging from the innocuous to the indefensible. One of the growing number of articles on Duke's website devoted to the subject states that Israeli manipulation is "the real reason" for hostilities between the United States and North Korea. Another implies that the late Otto Warmbier was an Israeli spy. Others have joined his chorus of North Korean apologetics.

"North Korea is not communist, plain and simple," writes Paulson. Instead, the nation follows a governing philosophy known as *Juche*, "the spirit of self-reliance." This is important, as the alt-right believes free enterprise destroys national cultures and eventually leads to miscegenation. Paulson writes:

While I don't agree with the extent of the state-control of the economy in North Korea (i.e. controlling consumption), I certainly have no loyalty to the capitalist system, which I see as racially corrosive, among other things. And let us not forget the whole reason the United States got involved in the Korean civil war was to defend (or impose) capitalism and by extension the ruling international financial order.

Essentially I admire North Korea because it is in direct opposition to the hostile ruling elite in the West and the globalist destruction of distinct peoples and nations.

Such devotion can spin the nation's foremost problem into an asset.

The article lists among its "Reasons to Admire North Korea" the nation's reportedly high

average IQ and its pandemic starvation. True, North Korea "has struggled to adequately feed some portions of its population, but that is the price of independence for them, and they are willing to pay it – and for that alone the North Koreans get my respect. ... [T]hey seem willing to die to maintain their independence."

As many as 2.5 million North Koreans starved to death during the 1990s. Presently, 10.5 million North Koreans are "undernourished," 28 percent of children under five have their growth stunted, and 4.4 million citizens are in a state of "crisis, emergency and famine." Yet North Korea's military budget is an estimated one-quarter of its GDP – and both the Korean People's Army and Kim Jong Un appear well-fed.

These are not sacrifices willingly undertaken to secure their independence but deprivations ruthlessly imposed to maintain their enslavement.

The same aim lies behind the cult of personality, which attributes magical powers to successive incumbents of the Kim dynasty. This, too, the alt-right is willing to countenance, because the cult replaces other ideologies ... and religions.

"Nothing North Koreans believe comes close to matching the absurdity of Christianity, Marxism, Freudism, Diversityism, feminism or racial egalitarianism," writes Richard Hoste in his review of Myers' book for *Counter Currents*.

Similar hostility to the modern world has forged an intellectual, if not ethnic, kinship between North Korea and the alt-right. Should the peninsula reunite and "choose to reject all aspects of multiculturalism I will be the first ones [sic] to cheer them on," Hoste writes.

Heimbach even offered his services as North Korea's equivalent of Tokyo Rose (Pyongyang Pete?) "I've thought about going and giving a tour, or something like that, especially if the DPRK government wanted to be able to reach out to Americans," Heimbach said last year. "That would definitely be an invitation that I would be more than happy to accept."

The alt-right's embrace of North Korea shows how far from reason their cocktail of fervid racialism, obscurantism and anti-capitalism can take them.

Rev. Ben Johnson is a senior editor at the Acton Institute. [R&L](#)

SISTER MARY KENNETH KELLER (1913–1985)

Amy Ballor

For the first time, we can now mechanically simulate the cognitive process.

—Sister Mary Kenneth Keller

Sister Mary Kenneth Keller established herself as a strong influence in the world of computer science at a time when women in the field were unheard of. At the same time, her work paved the way for what we now understand as the information economy — a key driver of wealth creation. She was the first woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in computer science and later went on to help develop the BASIC programming language (Beginners All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code), which transformed the world of computer science.

Relatively little information is known about Keller's early life. She was born on December 17, 1913, to John Adam Keller and Catherine Josephine (née Sullivan) in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1932, she followed God's call to the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dubuque, Iowa, and in 1940 took her vows with the congregation.

She then began her academic career in Chicago, completing both a B.S. in math and an M.S. in math and physics from DePaul University in 1943 and 1953, respectively.

In 1958, Keller started at the National Science Foundation workshop in the computer science center at Dartmouth College, which was an all-male school at the time. While there she teamed up with computer scientists John G. Kemeny and Thomas E. Kurtz to develop the BASIC programming language.

BASIC revolutionized computer



programming by allowing anyone who could learn the language to write custom software. Before BASIC, only mathematicians and scientists could do so. Versions of BASIC became widespread on the first personal computers in the 1970s and 1980s, allowing everyone from business owners to computer hobbyists to develop software.

Throughout her graduate studies Keller was associated with several other prestigious institutions in addition to Dartmouth, including the University of Michigan and Purdue. Keller eventually earned her Ph.D. in computer science from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1965. Her thesis was titled “Inductive Inference on Computer Generated Patterns.”

Keller went on to establish the computer science department at Clarke College, a Catholic college for women founded by the Sisters of Charity of the

Blessed Virgin Mary. She chaired the department for 20 years, where she was an advocate for women in computer science. She was noted for her support of working mothers and even encouraged mothers to bring their babies to class with them.

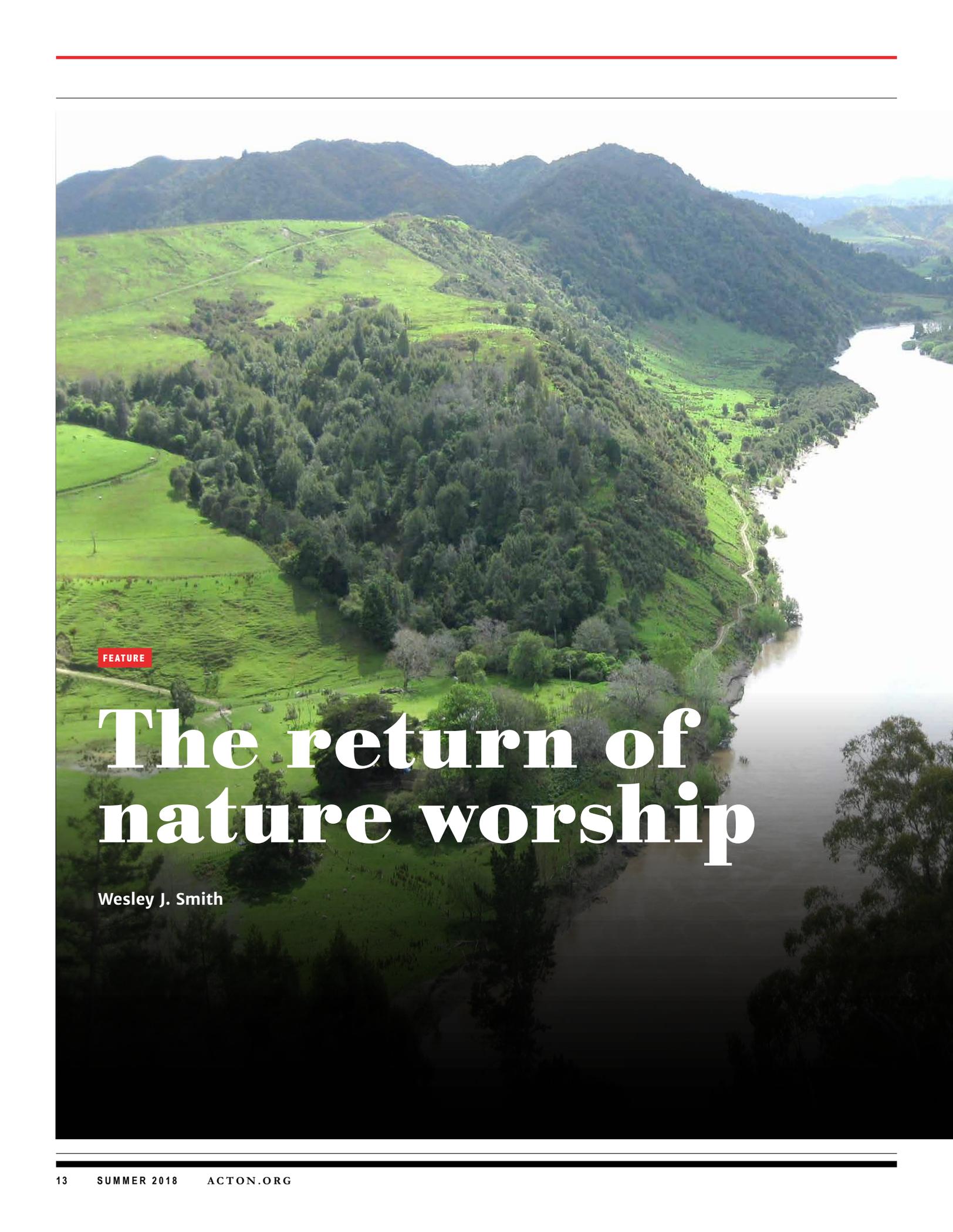
Keller was one of the first to recognize and acknowledge the future extensive role computers would have in the world. In 1964, she noted that students in fields such as psychology and the sciences were already finding computers to be useful in their academic work. She advocated for the use of computers in education and established a master's degree program for computer applications in education at Clarke. She also predicted the significance computers would have in libraries, saying, “Its function in information retrieval will make it the hub of tomorrow's libraries.”

Keller was enthusiastic about providing access to computers to everyone, not only computer scientists. “We're having an information explosion, among others,” she said, “and it's certainly obvious that information is of no use unless it's available.”

In her honor, Clarke University (formerly Clarke College) has established the Mary Kenneth Keller Computer Science Scholarship and the Keller Computer Center, which offers computing and telecommunication support to Clarke University staff, faculty members and students.

Keller died at the age of 71 in Dubuque, Iowa, on January 10, 1985.

Amy Ballor is contributing editor of Religion & Liberty. [R&L](#)



FEATURE

The return of nature worship

Wesley J. Smith



Photo: Whanganui River, New Zealand © Felix Engelhardt

We live in decadent times. Universal human rights have not been fully attained, yet radical environmentalists insist that flora, fauna and even *geological features and structures* should be deemed legal persons, a meme known as “nature rights.”

The drive to grant rights to the entirety of the natural world has already achieved stunning victories. In 2008, Ecuador granted human-type rights to “nature” in its constitution back, while Bolivia recently passed a law to the same effect. More than 30 United States cities and municipalities, including Santa Monica and Pittsburgh, have also granted rights to nature.

In 2014, an Argentinian court issued a writ of habeas corpus for an orangutan, declaring the animal to be a “non-human person” that had been “deprived of liberty” and requiring the animal’s release from a zoo to a primate sanctuary. Four rivers have been granted rights – three by court orders (including the Amazon and Ganges) – while the New Zealand Parliament declared the Whanganui River to be an “integrated, living whole” possessing “rights and interests.” In the United States, the Colorado River was named as a litigant in a lawsuit but later withdrawn. Meanwhile, in two separate cases, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that cetaceans and monkeys are entitled to Article III Constitutional standing in court – that is, they are entitled to bring federal suits if they can demonstrate harm – albeit the specific cases were dismissed due to statutory considerations. Even former Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon declared his support for the idea.

The putative rights of nature

So, what are these supposed rights of nature and from whence do they spring? For many environmentalists, the push seems to be a neo-earth religion. For example, the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature has stated:

- (1) Mother Earth is a living being.
- (2) Mother Earth is a unique, indivisible, self-regulating community of interrelated beings that sustains, contains and reproduces all beings.
- (3) Each being is defined by its relationships as an integral part of Mother Earth.
- (4) The inherent rights of Mother Earth are inalienable in that they arise from the same source as existence.

Paganism aside, the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) has led the drive to grant rights to nature. Under CELDF’s influence, Ecuador’s 2008 constitution virtually declares a right to life for nature:

Nature or Pachamama [the Goddess Earth], where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution.

Other nature rights laws and proposals are similarly worded. For example, the Green Party of England and Wales adopts most of the above quoted wording in its political platform – absent the mystical concept of Pachamama – and adds a “right to restoration” as a remedy for violations of nature’s rights. Pittsburgh’s ordinance states that “[n]atural communities and ecosystems, including but not limited to, wetlands, rivers, streams, aquifers, and other water systems, possess inalienable and fundamental rights to exist and flourish within the city of Pittsburgh.”

The Earth Law Center has promoted a similar approach. For example, its (draft) Universal Declaration of River Rights states in part that “all rivers are living entities that possess legal standing in a court of law” and that “all rivers shall possess, at minimum, the following fundamental rights:

- (1) The right to flow;
- (2) The right to perform essential functions within its ecosystem;
- (3) The right to be free from pollution;
- (4) The right to feed and be fed by sustainable aquifers;
- (5) The right to native biodiversity; and

(6) The right to restoration.”

So much for Hoover Dam and farmers' access to adequate water for irrigation.

Many readers may be wondering how animals, plants, insects, rivers, granite outcroppings, bacteria, plankton and viruses – all parts of nature, after all – would enforce their rights. Here's the ingeniously insidious part: These laws and proposals permit anyone who objects to a proposed or ongoing use of the natural world to bring a lawsuit as “nature's” representative. Pittsburgh's statute put it this way: “Residents of the City shall possess legal standing to enforce those rights on behalf of ... natural communities and ecosystems.” In other words, the claims made to enforce nature's “rights” would only be limited by the imaginations of the most extreme environmental activists and their lawyers.

Why nature rights?

Activists claim that granting rights to nature is a matter of sheer necessity. Believers are terrified that we are on the brink of ecological collapse caused by our self-separation from nature. If we would only see ourselves as a coequal part of the natural world, they believe, we would tread more gently on the land and learn to live in ecological harmony with the rest of the planet.

Thus, CELDF's associate director, Mari Margil, wrote recently in *The Guardian* of nature being “enslaved,” because it is considered “property,” while we and our human associations are deemed “persons.” This paradigm, Margil believes, has led to catastrophic environmental destruction. From her op-ed, “Our Laws Make Slaves of Nature”:

Existing legal systems force us to think of nature in terms of human concerns rather than what concerns nature. With the past three years the warmest in recorded history, and as we face what has been called the sixth great extinction, lawmakers and judges appear increasingly to agree that it is time to secure the highest form of legal protection for nature, through the recognition of rights. ...

As daily headlines tell us how we are tearing holes in the very fabric of life on earth, it is time to make a fundamental shift in

how we govern ourselves towards nature – before, as Colombia's constitutional court wrote [granting rights to the Amazon River], it's too late.

Anti-capitalism and anti-corporatism provide the movement's propellant. Nature rights would make us trustees, rather than owners, of property. And here the truth begins to shine. The rights of nature is a Marxist concept, intended to destroy free markets, thwart capitalistic enterprise, shrink economies, reduce wealth and depress living standards while elevating the natural world to moral equivalence with human beings.

Why not “nature rights”?

Which brings us to the core reasons why granting rights to nature would be not only profoundly subversive of Western values but also highly destructive to human thriving.

Nature rights violates human exceptionalism: Human exceptionalism, the essential insight undergirding Western civilization, has come under direct assault by the nature rights movement. But what does that term mean? First, human beings have equal and inherent moral value simply and merely because we are human – a worth that exceeds that of all other life forms – a concept known as the sanctity of life ethic.

But that description doesn't tell the whole story. Human exceptionalism also appeals to our exclusive capacity for moral agency. Only human beings have duties – to ourselves, each other and our posterity – to be responsible stewards of the environment and to leave a verdant world to those who come after us. Recognizing our exceptional inherent nature, we understand that the world is not ours to turn into a cesspool. Or to put it another way, if being human – in and of itself – isn't what imposes the obligation on us to be environmentally responsible, what does?

Nature rights activists see it differently. To them, the traditional hierarchy of life is a destructive concept. In their view, we are no more important than any other species or life form and, it increasingly seems, even non-animate features of the natural world. Or, to put it more colloquially, nature rights ideology seeks to demote us from the exceptional species to just another animal in the forest.

Nature rights devalues the vibrancy of rights: University of Michigan professor of

philosophy Carl Cohen writes: “A right ... is a valid claim, or potential claim, that may be made by a *moral agent*, under principles that govern *both the claimant and the target of the claim*” (emphasis added). This means that for nature to possess rights, it must also be capable of assuming concomitant duties or responsibilities toward others, a farcical notion.

Beyond that, granting rights to nature means that *everything* is potentially a rights-bearer. If everything has rights, one could say that nothing really does. At best, nature rights would devalue the concept in much the same way that wild inflation destroys the worth of currency. Indeed, if a squirrel or mushroom and all other earthly entities somehow possess rights, the vibrancy of rights withers.

Nature rights would cause profound harm to human thriving: Granting rights to nature would bring economic growth to a screeching halt by empowering the most committed and radical environmentalists – granted legal standing to act on “nature's” behalf – to impose their extreme views of proper environmental stewardship through the buzz saw of unending litigation. Backed by well-funded environmentalist organizations and their lawyers, any and all large-scale economic or development projects – from oil drilling, to housing developments, to mining, to farming, to renewable energy projects, such as electricity-generating windmills that kill countless birds – could face years of harassing lawsuits and extorted financial settlements. At the very least, liability insurance for such endeavors would become prohibitively costly – indeed, if underwriters permitted policies to be issued for such projects at all. Of course, that is the whole point.

Nature rights would be incapable of nuanced enforcement: Christian and Jewish dogma hold that God assigned us the responsibility to be good stewards of his earth. But we are also commanded to thrive off the bounties of nature. Such a view allows the natural world to be harnessed for human benefit mediated by our responsibilities to engage in proper environmental policies and practices.

Granting rights to nature would shatter this nuanced approach to environmental husbandry. Take as one quick example, the Endangered Species Act. The law provides that if an identified species becomes endangered, threatening human activity will

be prevented. But that doesn't end the matter. Once populations of the endangered species return to healthy levels – the point of the law – its designation will be changed, alleviating or removing the prior restraints on human activity.

In contrast, nature rights would have all the nuance of handcuffs that could never be unlocked. Under such a regime, nuanced husbandry practices would yield to the “right” of “nature” to “exist and persist.” The human benefit from our use of the natural world would, at most, receive mere equal consideration to the impacted aspect of nature's rights – and this would be true no matter how dynamic and otherwise thriving the potentially impacted aspects of nature might be.

Nature rights is unnecessary to proper environmental protection: We can provide robust safeguards for the environment without the subversion of granting rights outside the human realm. Yellowstone National Park, for example, is one of the great wonders of the world. It has been splendidly protected since 1872, when made a national park, and in a manner that has both protected its pristine beauty *and* allowed people to enjoy its incredible marvels – without declaring Old Faithful geyser a “person” entitled to enforceable rights.

Enough. When we dig to the intellectual core of the movement, we find that the controversy isn't about “rights” at all. Rather, we are having an epochal debate about the scope, nature and extent of our responsibilities toward the natural world. These obligations, it is important to add, are predicated solely on our being human. In this sense, the nature rights controversy and the desire of some to maximally sacrifice our own welfare to “save the planet” is ironic proof of the very human exceptionalism that nature rights environmentalists reject.

It's time to splash some icy river water on our faces: The threat of nature rights can't be ignored any longer. Unless we act to ensure that only human beings and our associations and enterprises are the proper subjects of rights and legal standing in courts of law, we face a darker and less prosperous human future.

Award-winning author Wesley J. Smith is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism and the author of The War on Humans. **R&L**

BRIEF

AFTER JANUS, NEW MODELS FOR LABOR RELATIONS

Charles W. Baird

The U.S. Supreme Court took a significant step toward restoring individual liberty in the government-sector labor market with its recent *Janus* decision. In brief, the Court ruled that henceforth no government employee would have to pay any labor union any fee as a condition of continued government employment. While the *Janus* decision is cause for liberty lovers to celebrate, it leaves in place an equally burdensome affront to individual liberty in government employment – exclusive representation. It should be replaced by members-only representation.

A union acquires exclusive representation privileges if it wins a majority vote in a certification election among workers whom it seeks to represent. A winning union gets to represent the workers who voted for it, the workers who voted against it and the workers who didn't vote. When a union is certified by such a vote, individual workers are even forbidden to represent themselves on terms and conditions of employment. It is a winner-take-all rule.

Union apologists justify exclusive representation on the grounds that it is democratic. They analogize it to winner-take-all elections for members of Congress. However, unions are not governments. They are private entities in the business of labor representation.

Moreover, the Constitution requires members of Congress to stand for reelection on a regular basis. Under exclusive representation, a winning union never has to stand for reelection. It is one worker, one vote, once.

The Constitution forces numerical minorities to submit to the will of numerical majorities, but only on matters within the authorized scope of government. Private entities may choose to make their decisions by majority rule, but government cannot legitimately force them to do so. Nor may government legitimately force private individuals to associate with any private organization.

While the *Janus* decision was based on the First Amendment's guarantee of free, uncoerced political speech, exclusive representation in government employment may be challenged as a violation of workers' First Amendment freedom of association. If I represent you, you and I are associated with each other on the matters covered by such representation. Exclusive representation forces individual government workers to accept association with a union, which is a private organization, for purposes of representation on terms and conditions of government employment.

Freedom of association is not merely a legal concern. In the Catholic social tradition, it forms the moral basis for labor unions. Pope Leo XIII, for example, in his pathbreaking social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), identifies labor unions as one form of “private society.” And entering into such societies is “the natural right of man; and the State has for its office to protect natural rights, not to destroy them.”

Charles W. Baird is professor of economics at California State University, East Bay, and author of Liberating Labor: A Christian Economist's Case for Voluntary Unionism (Acton Institute, 2002). This article is excerpted from his July 11, 2018, Acton commentary.

Why tariffs and protectionism make Americans poorer

Joe Carter

At the end of May, President Trump imposed tariffs on imported steel (25 percent) and aluminum (10 percent) from the European Union, Canada and Mexico. Not surprisingly, the tariffs triggered immediate retaliation from U.S. allies against American businesses and farmers.

“This is protectionism, pure and simple,” said Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission. Juncker is correct. The tariffs are a form of protectionism frequently proposed by populists and Democrats. But what is wrong with protectionism? The short answer is that it makes Americans poorer.

To show why this is the case, let me start by defining a few key terms that are relevant to my argument:

Protectionism is the practice of shielding a country’s domestic industries from foreign competition by taxing imports. A protectionist is a person who advocates for protectionism.

Free trade is when international trade is left to its natural course without tariffs, quotas or other restrictions. A free trader is a person who advocates free exchange of goods and services between nations without regulatory barriers such as tariffs or quotas. By definition, a (consistent) free trader opposes protectionism.

Consumption is the use of goods and services by households.

That last one is particularly significant. The importance of consumption to human flourishing is the primary reason many economists argue that, though both groups are essential, consumers should take priority over producers. As Adam Smith wrote in his book *The Wealth of Nations*:

Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self evident that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it.

Because of the importance of consumption, I’ll add a new label that identifies my position:

Consumption-first advocate — a person who supports policies (such as free trade) that prioritize consumption and the consumer and advocate for increasing overall consumption in a way that some policies (such as protectionism) do not.

Now that we have our key terms defined, let’s consider the disagreement between protectionists and consumption-first advocates (and other free traders).

We should start by noting that for the majority of people who advocate protectionism, their motive is noble: they want to protect jobs. On this we consumption-first advocates are in agreement with them.

Jobs are one of the most important aspects of a morally functioning economy. They help us serve the needs of our neighbors and lead to human flourishing both for the individual and for communities. Conversely, not having a job can adversely affect the spiritual and psychological well-being of individuals and families.

Jobs are of utmost importance in our economy, which is the primary reason people support protectionist policies and oppose policies that encourage globalization, such as “outsourcing” jobs overseas. Some protectionists believe we should protect all jobs, while others advocate protecting jobs in certain industries or that have certain levels of income (e.g., high-paying factory jobs).

Almost all protectionists, free traders and consumption-first advocates would (or at least should) agree that: jobs are important; we should build an economy that is able to create/provide a job for anyone who wants one; and every hardworking and motivated person

should (eventually) be able to achieve a level of productivity in which they can earn a living wage.

However, the consumption-first advocate would say that while these goals are noble, they are merely part of the larger goal of increasing human flourishing for as many people as possible. They would also point out that the purpose of the job is *not merely to produce income*. This is a crucial point that is often overlooked by protectionists, who tend to focus on jobs primarily as a source of income.

To be clear, the protectionists aren’t necessarily wrong. Income is certainly a crucial aspect of a job. But focusing primarily on income obscures the fact that the *purpose of income is to increase consumption*. Income is a means by which we can increase our consumption, but it is not the sole factor we should consider. That is why we should focus on consumption first, and only then on secondary considerations such as income.

The reason is that consumption is a better indicator of well-being and human flourishing than income, or even wealth. A good example of this is found in the recent movie “The Martian”. While he is stranded on Mars, the astronaut Mark Watney is technically still earning an income from NASA. But that money doesn’t do him much good when he is stuck on a planet without supermarkets. What matters most for Watney’s life is his ability to consume goods and services necessary for survival — not how much income is sent by direct deposit each month into his checking account.

The same is true for income here on Earth. What matters most is not necessarily the *level* of income, but how much that income allows you to consume. It would be counterproductive to have a high income if the increase in income *reduces* your level of consumption. Similarly, it is counterproductive to increase the income for a certain part of the workforce when it *reduces* the level of consumption for everyone else in America. Unfortunately, that is exactly what protectionism does.

Let’s look at an example of how that happens. The U.S. government decides to implement a tariff that will “save” 1,200 full-time jobs at a tire plant.

Each of the saved jobs pays an average wage of \$40,070 a year (\$20.69 per hour). Sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Maybe that’s a policy we should support.

But what if I told you that those 1,200

jobs cost the American consumer \$900,000 each? Oh, and while 1,200 jobs were created, it came at a cost to the American economy of 2,531 jobs. That might make us reconsider whether the policy was all that beneficial.

Unfortunately, this is not a hypothetical situation; it's the real-world effect of a tariff on Chinese tires.

In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama claimed that "over a thousand Americans are working today because we stopped a surge in Chinese tires." What he failed to mention is that for every tire job that was "saved," two other jobs were lost or not created, and that each job "saved" cost Americans an additional \$900,000 a year.

If the workers only got \$40,070, what happened to the other \$859,930? It went into the pockets of the tire companies, many of which are not even located in the U.S. When the companies pushed for the tariffs to "save American jobs," what they were really doing was increasing their own profits by preying on the economic ignorance of the American public about the effects of tariffs. (Crony capitalists are gifted in finding ways to get the public to support policies that make them richer while making other citizens poorer.)

This is a classic example of how protectionism focuses on that which is seen and ignores what which is not seen. Like the president, it's easy for us to "see" the 1,200 jobs that were saved. What is harder — indeed nearly impossible — for the public to see is the cost of the protectionist policy, including the jobs that *weren't created* because of the tariffs.

Which brings us back to consumption. Because Americans had to spend an additional \$900,000 more for tires than they would have without the tariff, they have less to spend on other goods and services. While those 1,200 tire workers may have been better off (depending on whether they could have found other jobs), the American public overall was made much, much worse off.

Somewhere a parent wasn't able to buy new clothes for their children because they had to spend more money than was necessary on tires. Somewhere a single mother had to choose between putting food on the table and getting a new tire to make it possible to drive her car to her job. Those are the types of decisions the tariff forced Americans to make.

Joe Carter is a senior editor at the Acton Institute. [R&L](#)

TV

Power, people and things in "Westworld"

Micah Watson

Since I was a child I've always loved a good story. I believed that stories helped us to ennoble ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the people we dreamed of being."

So begins Anthony Hopkin's character, Robert Ford, in his speech marking the finale of the first season of HBO's mind-bending, techno-philosophical series "Westworld." Ford is the brilliant co-creator of Westworld, a theme park set several decades in the future in which wealthy customers can live out their fantasies, whatever they may be, with no apparent cost or consequence. The genius of Ford's creation is not the theme park itself, though the sets and landscapes perfectly capture the nostalgic details of the vintage 1880s-era Western. What really sets Westworld apart is the "hosts" that populate the park, robots who inhabit various roles and inspire plots and who are entirely indistinguishable from the all-too-human guests who pay upwards of \$40,000 a day to interact with them. And the guests do interact as they please, some choosing heroic and noble roles to play and others indulging in baser appetites by killing, raping and abusing the non-human hosts who were created for that very purpose.

Without giving away too much, suffice to say the nature of those interactions have shattered Ford's dream. No, he still believes in the power of a good story,

and the creators of "Westworld" wink at the audience here as they do throughout the series with allusions to Shakespeare, the Bible, Greek mythology and Kurt Vonnegut. But Ford no longer believes human beings can be ennobled through stories. Our brokenness seems permanent. Like the story of the ring of Gyges in the mouth of Plato's Glaucon in *The Republic*, a world without consequences and accountability reveals a depth of human depravity that would unsettle the most hardened Calvinist. The first two seasons of "Westworld," and presumably the ones still yet to come,

explore Ford's attempt to rewrite the narrative of this new world he has helped to create.

Whatever one makes of the dramatic narrative, characters and, at times, maddening chronology of "Westworld," one cannot fault its creators for being intellectually timid. This show is ambitious, asking its viewers to wrestle with the big questions: free will, God, morality, love, consciousness, eternity, personhood, family and life's meaning. Fiction, particularly science fiction, offers us an alternative way to wrestle with these big questions at a sort of remove, or from a different angle.

One crucial element for all these big-ticket questions, and for development of the plot(s), is the line between subject and object, person and thing. So much of our everyday morality is wrapped up in this distinction that we can miss it, much like the proverbial line about the fish who responds to the question "How's the

"So much of our everyday morality is wrapped up in this distinction that we can miss it, much like the proverbial line about the fish who responds to the question 'How's the water today?' with 'What's water?'"



water today?” with “What’s water?”

When attuned to look for it, we find the importance of the distinction between people and things everywhere. It is there in the opening of the Hebrew scriptures, where everything is good, but human beings are somehow set apart as made in God’s image and stewards of everything else. We see it in Martin Buber’s distinction between an I-thou relationship and an I-it relationship. We see it in perhaps its most pure philosophical form in one of Immanuel Kant’s articulations of the categorical imperative to “treat humanity . . . never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.” In other words, don’t treat people merely as things to be used, but as *people*, beings who have value in and of themselves.

The notion is as simple as the application can be complex and controversial. We see it at work in the marketplace, where we must determine what, if anything, should *not* be commodified as something to be bought and sold. Slavery is the quintessential example, the (now) most obvious violation of the norm that people should not be treated as usable things. But the principle is there in several other areas as well. When we consider the moral validity of practices, goods or services, we ask ourselves whether the practice crosses this particular line. Most of the time it does not, but sometimes it does. Does creating new human beings through in vitro fertilization treat those future persons too much like products made in a lab or factory? Renting a room in one’s house seems like it does not touch upon the principle, but surrogate motherhood seems somewhat closer. We allow the market to regulate how we sell our labor, though we make certain exceptions. A few jurisdictions excepted, we do not sell sex. We do not sell kidneys. We do sell our time and our effort, but we are ambivalent if not suspicious about jobs that depend on us selling, and damaging, some part of ourselves that is intrinsic to who we are, whether we think of the pornography industry or professional sports that leave athletes mentally and physically disabled by middle age. The closer a practice comes to treating people merely as things that can be used up the less comfortable we are. Or the less comfortable we should be.

Within the story itself, the basic appeal of Westworld as a theme park is the opportunity to escape that discomfort. Customers can take

“A world without consequences and accountability reveals a depth of human depravity that would unsettle the most hardened Calvinist.”



on another persona entirely, enjoy their side story and return home to normalcy after living vicariously through a version of themselves. An old tagline about Las Vegas comes to mind. Ford’s

chief antagonist, Ed Harris’s Man in Black, tells us the tourists “wanted a place hidden from God. A place they could sin in peace.” This only works if the mistreated aren’t really ends in themselves but merely things to be used. What if those “things” woke up and turned out to have souls? That’s the basic appeal of “Westworld” for us as viewers; we get to see this hypothetical question played out.

“Westworld” certainly isn’t the first to draw from the fascinating possibility of inanimate objects coming to life. From

Disney's "Pinocchio" to a slew of previous AI-themed science fiction films, such as "Blade Runner," "A.I.," and "Ex Machina," this genre provides a rich narrative vein to mine for stories about who we are, how we should treat one another and what, if anything, we are meant to become. One difference between "Westworld" and those stand-alone films is HBO's series has the luxury of addressing these questions over the course of twenty, thirty or even fifty hours instead of just two.

There will undoubtedly be much ink and pixel devoted to interpreting and analyzing where "Westworld" goes in addressing the "big questions." It may be premature at this point to speculate about the specific answers, if any, that "Westworld" will offer before it is finished. But two familiar questions in particular stand out, and they both relate to this distinction between people and things. What is human nature? And, related, what is the nature of good and evil?

Do the humans and the AI hosts in "Westworld" come pre-wired with a nature that they cannot help but follow? Is our consciousness merely an epiphenomenon giving us the illusion of choice when in reality our lives are akin to trains that cannot jump the tracks? Developments in the second season suggest that while there is a great deal to the characters' stories that is provided to them by either God or at least a mortal God (Robert Ford), some aspect of volition seems inescapable to make sense of what a person (AI or human) consists of. Things by definition don't really choose, don't take a better or worse path. At most some things can calculate, but even then they do so given pre-programmed instructions. The characters of "Westworld" go to great lengths to prove, often to themselves, that they have some measure of free will.

How they use that free will connects to the second theme of the nature of good and evil. "Westworld" frequently asks its characters whether they ever "question the nature of their reality." The age-old debate as to whether morality is somehow built into an objective reality or a social construct that can evolve or be programmed by ourselves is an open question in this story. Is the awful exploitation and sexual abuse perpetrated by the human guests on the hosts truly wrong? Would it be morally wrong for awakened hosts to viciously settle the score against their human overlords, quoting Shakespeare's quip in "Romeo and Juliet" that "these violent delights have violent ends"? What would make such actions wrong?

The answer to that last question is inextricably tied up in what we make of the actors and the acted upon. Is the actor a moral being with dignity and volition? If yes, then its decisions are susceptible to moral judgment. Is the being acted upon a person and not a thing? If so, that fundamentally informs the moral framework by which we judge the actor's decisions. The technological question of whether it will someday really be possible to achieve the "singularity" with artificial persons is less interesting than the moral question of how we should treat them if it does happen. This is because the issue of treating people like things is not at all hypothetical, and not at all science fiction. It is one of the fundamental questions about what it means to be human, and "Westworld" is only the latest story to pose that question to us. Whether its answers will ennoble us remains to be seen.

Micah Watson teaches political science at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. **R&L**

PODCASTING FOR A FREE AND VIRTUOUS SOCIETY

Subscribe on:

acton.org/radio-free-acton



ACTON BOOK SHOP

ON THE LAW OF NATURE A Demonstrative Method

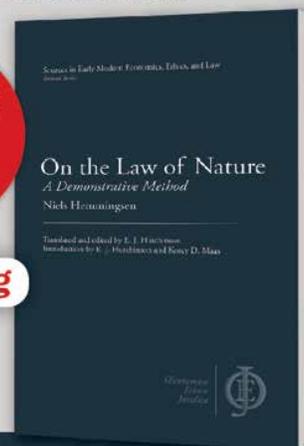
In this treatise Niels Hemmingen argues that all particular rules of ethical conduct can be derived from immutable axioms or first principles. This important treatise looks both backward to classical and medieval philosophy and forward to developments in the seventeenth century and beyond.

\$29⁹⁵

AVAILABLE NOW

shop.acton.org

Hardcover 256 pgs
ISBN: 978-1949011012



ADD LIBERTY AND VIRTUE TO YOUR COLLECTION

Mexico begins its own road to hell

Victor Mata

All Latin Americans at some point ask themselves: Why is no Latin American country as well-developed as the United States?

The answer is probably not related to our weather or a lesser disposition to work, as many have tried to claim. The answer is probably simpler: a socialist culture and a strong attachment to the left. Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina are all countries that suffered or are suffering devastating economic, political and social crises. They are all examples of countries that built their own road to the hell through socialism.

This summer's election was a chance for Mexico to change that trend. Mexico is a country in which many people don't have access to schooling, where the public health system is extremely deficient, and where it is not safe to walk in the street after 10 p.m. because drug cartels have taken control of some cities. It seems that the country's citizens took the worst option available to change that reality; they decided to elect as a president for the next six years a socialist with damaging populist appeal. His name is Andrés Manuel López Obrador and is known as AMLO. He is usually described as a nationalist and revolutionary linked with the Party of the Democratic Revolution, which in Spanish is the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático*. But above all, AMLO is an icon for the Mexican left.

Mexicans chose, unconsciously or

not, the socialist method of changing the reality of their country. There is no doubt that Mexico is going to experience a big transformation after December 2018. The real question is what kind of transformation? With much pain, I say the "change" will likely not improve life conditions for the Mexican people. Conversely, Mexico should prepare for the destruction of the national production workshop, as happened in Venezuela and Cuba.

Socialist and communist politicians arrive to govern through democratic means, and once in power use democratic institutions to change their constitutions and establish anti-democratic governments. They mostly use totalitarian systems, seeming democratic but controlling the whole society, including the economy, religion and education. They forget human dignity and animalize our moral condition through the two fundamental pillars of socialism: fear and lying. When the economy starts to decrease in socialist countries, usually governors lie to the people, blaming company owners or international bad luck for the internal economic crisis. When they cannot contain the protests generated by the crisis, they use fear-soldiers in the street to repress people and pursue and torture opposition leaders.

It is not by chance that Hispano-American socialists have sent public messages of support to AMLO, Dilma Rousseff (the socialist former president of Brazil), Cristina Kirchner (the socialist former president of Argentina), Pablo Iglesias (a leader of the left in Spain), Evo Morales (socialist president from Bolivia) and, of course, the communist dictator from Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro. It seems that AMLO is the new socialist support for Latin American countries.

The whole world should have been scared both by the electoral results in Mexico and the support that socialists offer one another. The most powerful country in Central America, and neighbor to the United States, may start a debacle next December that could deeply harm it. The socialist system, in the words of Winston Churchill, is "a philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance and the gospel of envy. Its inherent virtue is the equal sharing of misery."

Now is the chance for the opposition leadership to stand for the 46 percent of Mexican society who rejected the socialist system and voted for the three candidates who represented democratic ideas. Leaders have a moral duty to

both the millions of Mexicans who voted for freedom and to the millions of Mexicans who were seduced by AMLO's socialist charms. Leaders should understand that Mexico changed from a political bipartisan system to a new modern pluralism system. Making political parties strong and organizing civil society are some of the most important tasks that Mexican leaders have in this moment.

Mexico deserves to be strong, free and democratic, as millions of Mexicans dreamed when they voted for non-socialist candidates in this past election. All people of the world want a system that acknowledges their human dignity and allows them to develop. For those reasons, op-

position leaders and the international community must have a strong commitment to Mexican freedom.

Venezuelan lawyer Victor Mata is participating in Acton's summer 2018 Emerging Leaders Program. He begins his master's degree in global public policy this fall at University of Potsdam in Germany. R&L

“All people of the world want a system that acknowledges their human dignity and allows them to develop. For those reasons, opposition leaders and the international community must have a strong commitment to Mexican freedom.”

Editorial Board

Publisher: Rev. Robert A. Sirico
Executive Editor: John Couretas
Contributing Editor: Amy Ballor
Graphics Editor: Peter Ho

The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty promotes a free society characterized by individual liberty and sustained by religious principles. Letters and requests should be directed to:

Religion & Liberty, Acton Institute.
 98 E. Fulton Street, Grand Rapids,
 MI 49503.

The Acton Institute was founded on the basis of ten core principles, integrating Judeo-Christian truths with free market principles.

- *Dignity of the Person*
- *Social Nature of the Person*
- *Importance of Social Institutions*
- *Human Action*
- *Sin*
- *Rule of Law and the Subsidiary Role of Government*
- *Creation of Wealth*
- *Economic Liberty*
- *Economic Value*
- *Priority of Culture*

The notion of shared values on both sides of the Atlantic has received new attention. Leaders like French socialist president François Hollande cite “democracy, freedoms and the respect of every individual” as key values. But what about religious liberty, the breakdown of the welfare state, advancing secularism and the health of civil society? R&L Transatlantic will cover these issues here with new articles.

For archived issues or to subscribe, please visit www.acton.org. The views of the authors expressed in *Religion & Liberty* are not necessarily those of the Acton Institute.

© 2018 Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty.

NATURE, TECHNOLOGY AND POMPEII

Rev. Robert A. Sirico



The primary mission of the Acton Institute since its inception has been identifying and revealing both traditional and innovative tonics to ward off Lord Acton's dictum: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In fact, the manner in which we wield our power over one another, our environment and God's other creatures defines our humanity, or, in other words, who we are as individuals and social creatures.

Our combined tradition teaches us that humanity was not created by God to live in chains forged by other humans. Nor were we left without instructions on the care of our planet and its nonhuman denizens. Our Creator from the beginning had much better aspirations for us all.

However, one doesn't have to be a grizzled rock guitarist and polarizing raconteur to recognize it's one thing to respect and nurture God's creations and another, totally different, thing to worship Earth's flora and fauna. The former is Judeo-Christian principles practiced prudentially while the veneration of nature is mere paganism. We are called to be stewards of the environment, which entails conscientiousness of our planet's vulnerabilities and concomitant realization of Earth's resilience and sometimes cruelty.

Having recently returned from an archaeological dig in Pompeii, Italy, I can attest to the massive power wielded by nature against humanity and Earth itself. The city, readers recall, was buried under an estimated millions of tons of pumice, ash and rock after the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D.

I had the opportunity to assist in the excavation of the site in July of this year, fulfilling one of my longtime dreams. I was presented with the opportunity to witness firsthand the amazing power and devastation of the occurrences of nearly 2,000 years ago, which was tremendously humbling. The climax of my experience was actually uncovering human vertebrae unexposed since Mount Vesuvius claimed the lives of approximately 20,000 humans in not only Pompeii but also nearby Stabiae and Herculaneum two millennia ago.

Scientists conjecture contents of the volcano spewed 22 miles above the Italian villages before finally settling and smothering them. The work to uncover them began nearly 300 years ago, a painstakingly slow and labor-intensive job only recently made much easier by modern technology.

My experiences gave me much to ponder regarding both the environment and human ingenuity. Much good has come from human technological advancements. From the laptop and software I'm using to write this piece to the Internet and networking devices I'll use to share this with editors and printers, technology holds the potential for wondrous time- and labor-saving tasks.

But, most important, we have technology to alert us before a major tragedy occurs. Remember: nature is still capable of wreaking tremendous havoc. And Mount Vesuvius is still an active volcano. With the use of contemporary technologies, it is hoped that another 2,000 human lives won't perish when it erupts again.

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is president and co-founder of The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. [R&L](#)

The Good Society

tgs

The Good Society explores the economic, moral, political, social and theological foundations of a flourishing society.

LEARN MORE AND WATCH

[ACTON.ORG/TGS](https://acton.org/tgs)