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Nature, Aesthetics, and Ecological Ethics: Michael Northcott, and Robert Doran in Dialogue

ABSTRACT: *This issue of "Filosofia" is dedicated to the theme "Images of Nature". While issuing the call for papers, the editor explained the choice of the theme as follows: "the problem of ecological crisis that arises nowadays has forced philosophy to break out of the classic schemes of modernity, developing new categories and a renewed philosophy of nature". The editor adds: "nature becomes a thought-laboratory, from which to think new ethical, political, aesthetic, and metaphysical perspectives". In this article, I introduce the thought of two thinkers who exhibit the characteristics identified by the editor. The first is Michael Northcott, an important English-speaking ecological ethicist; the second is Robert Doran, a Jesuit theologian, whose critical realist thought can help to provide foundations for the orientations found in Northcott. Taken together, their reflections are worthy of consideration by those who consider their thought as a renewal of the philosophy of nature for nowadays.*

KEYWORDS: *ecology, nature, environment.*

1. Northcott: "An Ecological Reconstitution of Natural Law Ethics"

Northcott is an English Anglican priest who worked for most of his life, until his recent retirement, in the University of Edinburgh, where he held a chair of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology. He has published nine books and numerous articles. His first book, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*¹, establishes a framework for most of what follows.

1.1. The Environment and Christian Ethics

In Chapter 1 of this book, entitled *Frogs, floods and famines*, Northcott offers an overview of the current ecological crisis. In Chapter 2, *The Turn to Nature*, he presents an overview of current debates in ecological ethics. He explains that most of these adopt positions that are either consequentialist (John Stuart Mill)

¹ M. S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

or deontological (Kant)². In a section entitled *The Relational Self And Ecological Virtue*³, Northcott criticises consequentialist and deontological thinkers for having exaggerated the implications of modern scientific method for ethics and of having created false dichotomies between the rational mind and other dimensions of human nature that are relevant for moral living. He claims that such an approach to ethics is part of the problem of the ecological crisis.

As an alternative to Enlightenment ethics, Northcott advocates an “ecological repretination of natural law ethics”⁴. On this issue, he invokes a series of authors. One is Val Plumwood, a feminist author, who criticizes the prevalent, modern, approach to moral reasoning as involving “the quest for a logical, abstract and universal moral discourse of contracts and absolute forms of norms and responsibilities” while it “eschews the normal human discourses of love and care, reciprocity, emotional attachment and familial concern”⁵. Northcott next turns to Alisdair MacIntyre to suggest that environmental ethics must situate itself within traditions of ethical discourse that have long histories, that tend to have spiritual and religious underpinnings, and that recognize the importance of cultivating personal virtue:

the reversal of the environmental crisis... will only come about when we recover a deeper sense for the relationality of human life to recover a deeper sense for the relationality of human life to particular ecosystems and parts of the biosphere, and where communities of a place foster those virtues of justice and compassion, of care and respect for life, human and non-human, of temperance and prudence in our appetites and desire, which characterise to this day many of those surviving indigenous communities on the frontiers of the juggernaut of modernity.⁶

The reference to indigenous cultural communities that Northcott makes here brings him beyond MacIntyre and is a theme he will develop in later work. However, for the most part, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, echoes MacIntyre in concentrating on pre-modern European traditions. The final chapter of Northcott’s book is entitled, *Natural Law and Ecological Society*⁷. Here he traces the emergence of natural-law reasoning within the Western European philosophical tradition, praising “the deeply relational view of the human self which is enshrined in natural law thinking”⁸. Drawing on his denominational background, he comments on the Anglican Divine of the seventeenth century, John Hooker. This

2 Northcott also describes a category of ethical reasoning that he calls “ecocentric ethics”, a form of reasoning that blends philosophy with spirituality. He identifies the writings of James Lovelock on the “Gaia hypothesis” as representative of this school. He suggests that this line of thinking is not ultimately successful, stating: “this approach undermined the real differences that there are between human selves and the non-human world” (*ibidem*, p. 115).

3 *Ibidem*, Chapter 2 (*The Turn to Nature*).

4 *Ibidem*, p. 309.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 117. Northcott also quotes the psychologist Carol Gilligan to make a similar point (*ibidem*, p. 102).

6 *Ibidem*, p. 123.

7 *Ibidem*, pp. 226-256.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 237.

thinker argued that a form of Thomism is helpful in maintaining the *via media* approach that characterizes Anglicanism, an approach that tries to steer a course between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Turning to modern philosophers who speak of natural law, he does not find an approach that he finds completely adequate. He acknowledges the efforts of the philosopher of Oxford University, John Finnis, to perform a retrieval of Aquinas suitable for today. However, he suggests that Finnis ends up being more Kantian than Thomistic: “Finnis’s rejection of nature as moral source, and his attempt to locate natural law purely within the structure of human reason, is at fundamental variance with the account of the good offered by Aquinas”⁹. He concludes that much more work needs to be done in developing a notion of natural law appropriate for today. He adds that such thinking should make greater appeal to human bodiliness and how the individual, both body and spirit, participates in a finality that all created being enjoys toward God.

1.2. Ethics, Community and Culture

Northcott’s next three books devote less time to philosophy and focus more on the scientific, economic, political, and religious dimensions of the ecological crisis.¹⁰ However, in his subsequent book of 2013, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*¹¹, he returns to philosophical issues. In Chapter 5, *The Crisis of Cosmopolitan Reason*, he includes sections with titles such as *Kant, Cosmopolitan Reason and the Nature-Culture Divide* where he repeats the MacIntyre-like critique of Enlightenment approaches to rationality that he had established in *Environment and Christian Ethics*. He expands on in work of the 1990s by illustrating how philosophical errors are continuing to influence political decision-making in the early twenty first century. He also returns to the theme of importance of a renewed form of Thomism for today. He laments “the loss of a transcendent ground for moral judgements” and, turning to metaphysics, asserts: “without the analogy of being there is only sovereign power, unmediated, unrepresented, by priesthood, sacrifice, and worship”¹². He criticises the rationalistic appeal to a “culture of cosmopolis” found in Kant. In contrast, he refers to the notion of a “sacred cosmopolis” that pervaded early Christianity, stating that philosophy today needs to find an updated version of this:

The community worship of the early Christians, then, sustained a sacred cosmopolis which empowered the Christians to challenge the conventional human divisions and hierarchies of the ancient world through works of love while also giving them a vision of the natural world and the heavens which challenged the humanocentrism of

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

¹⁰ M. S. Northcott, *Life After Debt: Christianity and Global Justice*, London, SPCK, 1999; Idem, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2004, Revised paperback edition, London, SCM Press, 2007; Idem, *Cuttlefish Clones and Climate Change and Cluster Bombs: Preaching, Politics & Ecology*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010.

¹¹ M. S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, London, SPCK, 2013.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 249, 192.

classical and Roman thought. For the early Christians, salvation was an ecological as well as a political and spiritual reality in which the earth and all its creatures, as well as human society, were being redeemed through the worship and the witness of the saints and under the kingly rule of Christ.¹³

Northcott relates his comments on natural law thinking to what current authors call communitarian ethics, speaking of the need for “a communitarian alternative to [Kantian] cosmopolitanism”¹⁴. In exploring a communitarian vision, he offers considerations drawn from the controversial German philosopher, Carl Schmitt¹⁵. He acknowledges that Schmitt was justly condemned after World War II for having joined the Nazi party in the 1930s. However, he describes how there is a current renewal of philosophic interest in Schmitt, as he seems to anticipate the current resurgence of populism in politics and controversies on issues of national sovereignty, immigration, and international terrorism.

The most well know work of Schmitt is his work of 1932, *The Concept of the Political*. Here Schmitt draws on the German romantic political notion of the people, or *Das Volk*. He insists that individuals need to experience a sense of community and shared ethnic identity and explains how the sense of belonging this brings helps motivate individuals to participate in social institutions. He notes that a spiritual and religious dimension is traditionally associated with such a sense of belonging. He then speaks of how, in the modern era, it is to be expected that citizens will be prepared to accept the right of the state to both protect the borders of its territory and to define who is a friend or enemy and who, therefore, can traverse those borders. Schmitt insists that he is not proposing violent relations between states because he believes that states should accept the boarders within which they find themselves. He does acknowledge that there is a need for some higher order moral authority to help resolve tension between states when difficulties arise and looks back with nostalgia to the European Middle Ages and a time when the Holy See arbitrated disagreements between the neighbouring kingdoms. In works written after World War II, Schmitt suggests that the role that the U.S.A. was playing in the Cold War was analogous to that of the Holy See in medieval Europe¹⁶.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 198.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 200.

15 A key work of Carl Schmitt includes *The Concept of the Political* (1932), Engl. transl. by G. D. Schwab, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

16 Schmitt was an eccentric figure. He had been a devout Catholic in the 1920s but had departed from this faith when he was refused an annulment from a first marriage and proceeded to engage in a second, civil, marriage. He joined the Nazi party in 1933 and was at first given responsibilities as the editor of a Nazi magazine for lawyers. However, his stress on spiritual themes led him to be dismissed from this position in 1936 and accused of being a crypto-Catholic. In 1937 the Nazi party launched an investigation into his ideas that could have resulted in him being imprisoned. However, this investigation was halted by none other than Field Marshal Göring. After the War, Schmitt spent a year in an American internment camp. He refused to attend a programme of de-Nazification, which effectively barred him from receiving any academic appointment in subsequent years (see L. Vinx, *Carl Schmitt*, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/> – accessed August 8th, 2019).

Schmitt criticises the rationalism of Enlightenment figures like Kant, who developed a political philosophy based on abstract and individualistic notions of the social contract. He predicts that this will lead to an undermining of both the modern state and a consequent loss of sense of identity for its citizens. He suggests that under the pretence of social-contract thinking what would in fact unfold would be a social order that suited the interests of international economic elites. Northcott suggests that, in spite of its objectionable characteristics, the reflections of Schmitt seem surprisingly relevant today:

MacIntyre's critique of the democratized, emotivist, liberal self is the analogy in philosophical liberalism to Schmitt's account of the dehistoricised, despatialised, and despiritualised nation in political liberalism and international relations. Both discern a conflict between the liberal account of the autonomous individual, and the familial, geographical, historical, national, and religious contexts of individuals gathered into political collectives [...] Absent these ecological, historical, and spiritual moorings, the societal goal of economism (Schmitt) or economic efficiency (MacIntyre) becomes the *deus ex machina*, the 'fictitious believed-in-reality' which substitutes for God and geography in modern political judgement.¹⁷

1.3. An Aesthetic of Place

Where MacIntyre helps Northcott reflect about virtue, Schmitt helps Northcott think about the aesthetics of place. Northcott explores such themes in a book published in 2016, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities*¹⁸. Here he discusses how the reduction of biodiversity in today's world is intimately related to the loss of a sense of place. He adds that he is pleased to witness a "spatial turn in ethics" today. He speaks of the importance of "drilling down" into the human history associated with a place and discovering "the inter-generational forces that have made it what it is". He explains: "the anthropologist, the archaeologist, the ecologist, the geologist, the historian and the theologian all do this through their respective disciplines"¹⁹.

In Chapter 1, *Losing and Finding Sacred Place*, Northcott conducts a genealogy of the attitude to space in diverse cultural traditions. He notes how a sense of place was intrinsic to ethical living as understood by indigenous cultures and traces similar characteristics in the culture of medieval Europe. Next, he traces how modernity lost a sense of place. He identifies phenomena such as industrialisation and urbanisation as important factors here, but points also to how cultural attitudes – formed by philosophy – played an important role. He identifies roots of this modern development in medieval nominalism, which abandoned a notion of the analogy of being and developed an abstract and universalist sense of space.

17 M. S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, cit., pp. 250-251.

18 Idem, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, Kindle Edition.

19 *Ibidem*, Kindle locations, 3905; 355-358.

Next, echoing insights from *The Environment in Christian Ethics*, Northcott comments on how some ethicists have attempted to employ the instruments of Enlightenment philosophy to address spatial dimensions of the ecological crisis without recognizing that such instruments form part of the problem. He describes how the main voices in the public realm today defending biodiversity are representatives of the conservation movement. He traces the origins of this movement in nineteenth-century romanticism and notes that this movement tends to seek the creation of national parks from which humans are excluded. He claims that such policies are based on a philosophy that accepts the Enlightenment separation of humanity and nature. He concludes that “a potential implication of their critique is that it is the presence of humanity that is the heart of the problem”²⁰. By contrast, he proposes a notion of a return to small-scale labour intensive agriculture as valuable for many human and ecological goals, including the preservation of biodiversity.

In Chapter 3, *Artificial Persons and the Political Economy of Place*, Northcott studies the emergence in legal systems of a notion of the corporation as a legal entity with rights and duties. He traces how corporations such as the East India Company and the Hudson Bay Company became key instruments in British imperial policy. He then points out how, over time, the tail came to wag the dog, with a result that multi-national corporations became more powerful than the nation states in which they operate. He describes especially both the destructiveness and the inherent instability of the internationalized food industry. He notes that corporations involved in such activities employ Enlightenment reasoning to justify their behaviour and states:

Virtue ethics has the considerable advantage over other approaches to environmental ethics of highlighting the importance of face to face relationships of education and nurture, and of small-scale communities of place, in the formation of moral agents. From this perspective, multinational corporations are always at risk of creating a vicious character in their behaviour, that outweighs the virtues of the individuals that work for them, because of their large size, and the remoteness of their decision making chains.²¹

The final chapter of Northcott’s book is entitled *Re-placing Ethics in the City and the Countryside*. Here he stresses the value of rural living but adds that cities can be reorganized along lines that encourage small-community living. He returns to a reflection on natural law and speaks of how the work of child psychologists and evolutionary psychologists can be employed to support a natural law argument. He recalls how during the Enlightenment “morality was reductively shorn of its biological, embodied and familial roots and represented as an abstract sphere of emotional or rational responses to authority, law or rules”. He explains that these are tendencies in culture which, “moral and evolutionary psychologists are only now beginning to challenge and overcome”. He adds:

²⁰ *Ibidem*, Kindle location, 1273.

²¹ *Ibidem*, Kindle location, 2045.

Rich sensory experiences related to breast-feeding, touch, nutrition and the visual and auditory environment of home are all indicated as crucial determinants of moral flourishing and empathic capacities in growing children and young adults. These findings resist the tendency to emphasise linguistic interaction and rational thought processes as the principal crucible of moral behaviours. They also reveal the potential for denatured urban environments and industrialised foods to arrest or depress the development of creative, empathic and morally sensitive individuals.²²

Northcott also finds encouragement in the fact that a number of post-modern philosophers have recognized how a loss of sense of place is part of the moral problem of modernity. Here he mentions Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger; he also notes with approval how Michel Foucault proposes a strategy of seeking local food security as an act of resistance against cooperate dominance of economics²³. At the level of economics, he points to the appreciation of place that is implicit in the work on alternative technology of E. F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful*²⁴. He notes that Schumacher, a convert to Catholicism, explicitly adverts to a medieval notion of natural law reasoning to support his argument.

2. Doran: Conversion and the Dialectics of History

Northcott is recognized as appreciating the interdisciplinary character of the ecological question and as making brave efforts to do justice to this complexity. At the same time, some commentators identify an eclectic and non-systematic pattern in his thinking²⁵. This present work has focused on how Northcott adopts natural law reasoning in ethics as well as the way he relates aesthetics to ethics. On these issues, Northcott freely acknowledges that he is only outlining the broad lines of a philosophical direction that will have to be developed by others. In this context, I suggest that the thought of a Jesuit theologian from the U.S.A., Robert Doran, may help provide firmer roots for the ecological vision of Northcott. In this section I offer four ways in which the thought of Doran is compatible with that of Northcott, while at the same time rendering Northcott's thought more explanatory.

²² *Ibidem*, Kindle locations, 2045, 3861-3874.

²³ *Ibidem*, Kindle locations, 305, 645, 992.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, Kindle locations, 1141, 2100.

²⁵ One reviewer argues that Northcott's "method of appealing to scripture is non-scientific". He suggests that Northcott's "basically allegorical reading of the Scripture offers paradigms of social criticism and moral outrage" (A. Egan, SJ, Review of *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, in *Theological Studies*, 70 (2009), pp. 491-493. Conversely the Thomist, Fergus Kerr OP, praises Northcott's outline of the theory of natural law of Aquinas stating "it would be difficult, again, in the space, to provide a better account" (F. Kerr OP, Review of M. S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, in *New Blackfriars*, 79 (1998), pp. 105-107). See also reviews of *Environment and Christian Ethics*, in *Christian Century*, 114 (1997), p. 1097; and in *Theology Today*, 54 (1998), pp. 549-550.

2.1. Lonergan and Doran

First, Doran is deeply influenced by his mentor and fellow Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan. Both were motivated by a pastoral concern for the poor which did not extend to reflection on the ecological crisis, but which can be easily extended to it²⁶. Lonergan, born near Montreal, Canada, in 1904, was deeply affected by witnessing the poverty resulting from the Great Depression in the 1930s, as well as by the evils of the Second World War. He understood his life-project as developing a philosophy of history and a theological method to help the church to so influence society that such evils could be avoided in the future. Doran, born in 1939, grew up in Milwaukee, USA, and is a product of the Jesuit thinking about its mission in the years after Vatican II, a mission that speaks of “the service of faith and the promotion of justice”. In his major work, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, Doran engages with Latin American liberation theology.

While neither Lonergan nor Doran directly address questions of ecology, both are alert to the issue identified by Northcott: that the quality of one’s efforts to transform the direction of human history is influenced by how adequate are the philosophical instruments one is employing. Indeed, rather than disperse their attention to discuss a variety of social issues, Lonergan and Doran concentrate on foundational questions in in philosophy and theology.

2.2. Intellectual Conversion and Cosmopolis

Second, Doran’s work is firmly grounded in the notion of conversion provided by Lonergan, as well as by metaphysical notions developed by Lonergan of a universe characterized by “emergent probability”. Lonergan is known for two master-works: *Insight: A Theory of Human Understanding* (1957), and *Method in Theology* (1972)²⁷. The first half of Lonergan’s 800-page *Insight*, is devoted to cognitional theory and epistemology; its second half is devoted to metaphysics. *Method in Theology* deepens a reflection on ethics.

The first half of *Insight* can be understood as an effort to redress the problem in modern philosophy which Northcott identifies: “the loss of a transcendent ground for moral judgements”²⁸. These chapters lead up to Lonergan inviting his reader to affirm: “I am a knower”, recognizing that knowing is the culmination of three cognitional levels characterized by experience, insight, and judgment. He claims

26 G. Whelan, *Redeeming History: Social Concern in Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran*, Rome, G&B Press, 2013.

27 B. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, in Idem, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, ed. by F. E. Crowe and R. M. Doran, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, fifth edition, revised and augmented, 1992 (first published 1957); Idem, *Method in Theology*, in Idem, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 12, ed. by R. M. Doran and J. D. Dadosky, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017 (first published 1972).

28 M. S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, cit., p. 249.

that such an act of self-affirmation, or “intellectual conversion”, provides the transcendental ground for both judgments of fact and decisions to act.

Loneragan next discusses metaphysics. Here his analysis is in continuity with Northcott’s statement, “without the analogy of being there is only sovereign power, unmediated, unrepresented, by priesthood, sacrifice, and worship”²⁹. Lonergan states that, with intellectual conversion, we recognize that we are motivated by a “pure desire to know” and that, “being is the object of the pure desire to know”³⁰. He then suggests that there is an analogy, or an “isomorphism”, between the structure of our knowing and the structure of being. An elementary example of this isomorphism between the cognitional levels of experience, understanding, and judgement, and the metaphysical elements of matter, form, and existence. However, Lonergan adds that because knowing is a dynamic and cumulative process and there must be an analogous upward tendency in being. He notes that being is understood both by classical science and statistical science. Following his principle of isomorphism, he explains that there must be a corresponding quality of randomness and directedness in being itself. He then offers an explanation of how the “actual order of the universe” is one characterized by “emergent probability”. Here he offers an evolutionary vision of a universe characterized by “linked sequences of schemes of occurrence” that occurs at progressively high levels of being³¹.

The final chapters of *Insight* are devoted to discuss the human moment in the emergent process of being. Here Lonergan’s analysis can be understood as being in continuity with the notion introduced by Northcott of the need for a “sacred cosmopolis”. Lonergan identifies how humans are unique in being able to exercise freedom and to create new instances of being, such as culture and social structures. Based on the parallel ability for humans to behave in an inauthentic way, he develops a heuristic theory of history based on “vectors” of “progress”, and “decline”. He speaks of a dilemma of “moral impotence” in human living where the forces of decline always seem to have an advantage over the forces of progress. Anticipating the theological work that he will produce subsequent to *Insight*, Lonergan concludes the book by speculating about the existence of God and the nature of a “divine solution for the problem of evil” that such a God might initiate. On the bases of this, he expands his theory of history to speak of a vector of redemption. He describes how redemption will be comprised of communities of those who participate in the divine solution to the problem of evil and seek to reverse decline and promote progress. He borrows the term “cosmopolis” from Kant to speak of the service a community of morally and intellectually converted people can render to a culture. However, Lonergan’s notion of cosmopolis includes a confidence – possible only when God has initiated the divine solution to the problem of evil – in the possibility of exercising detached and disinterested reason. Consequently, the cosmopolis of Lonergan is closer to the “sacred cosmopolis”, praised by Northcott, that that proposed by Kant:

29 *Ibidem*, pp. 249, 192.

30 B. Lonergan, *Insight*, cit., p. 372.

31 Lonergan introduces his notion of emergent probability in Chapters 2 and 4 of *Insight*.

what is both unnecessary and disastrous is the exaltation of the practical, the supremacy of the state, the cult of the class. What is necessary is a cosmopolis that is neither class nor state that stands above all their claims, that cuts them down to size, that is founded on the native detachment and disinterestedness of every intelligence, that commands man's first allegiance, that implements itself primarily through that allegiance, that is too universal to be bribed, too impalpable to be forced, too effective to be ignored.³²

2.3. Psychic conversion

Third, Doran expands on the thought of Lonergan in way that is founded on a notion of "psychic conversion". This analysis resonates with the appeal Northcott makes to moral and evolutionary psychologists as a means of developing a natural law ethic.

Doran takes as a starting point for his reflection, developments in the later Lonergan. In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan expands his thinking about levels of consciousness to speak of a fourth level, concerned with decision-making. Here he describes how we often experience an affective response to facts we have affirmed as true. Such affective responses usually reveal that we are discerning values in feelings. Lonergan suggests that we respond to a "scale of values", in which vital values are subordinated to social values, cultural values, personal values, and religious values, in that order. He then states that we advance from discerning value to making a judgement of value and from here to making a decision to act. Lonergan also describes phenomena of moral conversion and religious conversion, which are registered in the fourth level of consciousness. He describes the former as occurring when we decide to be consistently authentic in our response to value and our consequent decision-making. He describes the latter as an experience of "the love of God flooding our hearts". His expanded notion of self-appropriation leads him to enrich his theory of history, illuminating the ethical moment in progress, and explaining in more depth what is involved in mediating redemption to history³³.

Doran accepts all that Lonergan states about conversion in both *Insight* and *Method in Theology*. However, he suggests that Lonergan's thought is incomplete and needs to pay more attention to the data about subjectivity provided by modern psychology³⁴. He pays careful attention to the way our affectivity is related to the way our unconscious and conscious minds interact. He notes that Lonergan had already referred to a Freudian notion of psychic censor, which is an operation in the brain which selects from the multiplicity of neural impulses being registered in our cerebral cortex which ones will be admitted to consciousness. Doran deepens this analysis with reference to the Jungian notion of "complex". He also moves beyond anything stated by Jung by asserting that the finality of the unconscious mind is to participate in the authentic subjectivity of conscious intentionality:

32 B. Lonergan, *Insight*, cit., p. 263.

33 Idem, *Method in Theology*, cit., Chapter 2 (*The Human Good*).

34 R. M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990, Chapter 2 (*The Notion of Psychic Conversion*), pp. 42-63.

all psychic energy is distributed into complexes. Some of these, formed by the development of habits, support and aid, we might say, the search for direction in the movement of life... They provide us with the images that we need for insight, or offer us memories that help us to discover ways of responding to new situations, or spontaneously to acquiesce in the progress of reflection that anticipates judgment, or to apprehend genuine values in an affectively charged way that will lead to action consistent with our affective response.³⁵

Doran, describes this tension between the unconscious and conscious intentionality as a basic “dialectic of the subject”³⁶. Next, however, he speaks of a second, conscious, dialectic where our psyche exists in tension with our “self-transcending spirit”. He speaks of this as a “finalistic tension” in consciousness³⁷. He describes how our the conscious experience of the psyche involves a primitive self-presence that registers acts of intentionality as they unfold through levels of experience, understanding, judgment etc. He describes the psyche as representing a principle of bodiliness and an instinct for intersubjective bonding. However, paradoxically, he also explains that the psyche as a “sensorium of the transcendence”³⁸. He describes the psyche as the seat of our affectivity and how it responds more to symbol than to ideas. He explains that it is as persons constituted by the dialectic of the subject that we respond to value. Consequently, he suggests that we respond to each level of value in a twofold, dialectical, way. At the level of social values he speaks of the “dialectic of community”, being constituted both by a tension between values of practical intelligence and of intersubjectivity. At the level of cultural values, he speaks of our need to respond to both “anthropological constitutive meanings” and “cosmological constitutive meanings”. At the level of personal values, he states that moral conversion needs to be combined with psychic conversion.

Just as Lonergan speaks about bias and moral impotence in subjectivity, so also Doran applies his expanded notion of subjectivity to this theme. Here he extends his account of Jungian complexes to a Jungian notion of victimization of the psyche. He explains, “our psychic energy can be blocked, fixed in inflexible patterns, driven by compulsions, plagued by obsessions, weighed down by general anxiety or specific fears, resistant to insight, true judgment, and responsible action”³⁹. He explains that in cases such as drug addiction, such victimization may be the result of one’s own self-destructiveness but he explains that a much more common source of victimization are those hurts received in childhood. Here, he notes, “psychic spontaneity as such is not morally responsible for its own disorder”⁴⁰. Doran next speaks about possibilities of healing victimization:

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, Part Two (*Personal Value and the Dialectic of History*).

³⁷ See *ibidem*, pp. 280-281 (referring to B. Lonergan, *Insight*, cit., pp. 484-507).

³⁸ R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, p. 657.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 232. Elsewhere Doran asserts: “dramatic bias is the consequence of autonomous complexes beyond the reach of immediate self-determination” (*ibidem*, p. 233).

first, one can recognize that the complex is a victim... next, one can adopt an attitude of compassion in its regard. And finally, one can allow there to emerge from the recognition and the compassion a willingness to cooperate with whatever redemptive forces are available to heal the disorder of darkness and to transform the contorted energies.⁴¹

Reference here to redemptive forces in this quotation indicates that Doran believes that God's grace is necessary for us in healing victimization. Like Northcott, his philosophical reflection always makes a transition into theology. However, strictly speaking, most of his analysis of subjectivity is conducted at a philosophical level. When he introduces a notion of psychic conversion he states: "psychic conversion is a transformation of the psychic component of what Freud calls 'the censor' from a repressive to a constructive agency in a person's development"⁴². In another definition, he states: "psychic conversion is conversion to attentiveness in that streak of sensitive consciousness, to internal communication, to responsible activity in regard to neural demands, to an openness to negotiate them persuasively and patiently"⁴³.

Doran suggests that psychic conversion will usually require at least some limited experience of psychotherapy. He explains that "the close connection of images and affects renders the dream a royal road to psychic conversion"⁴⁴. He recalls the analysis that Jung offers of archetypal symbols, which we share with all people. He then invokes the writings of Paul Ricoeur and other psychologists to add a notion of "anagogic dreams" which mediate healing symbols to consciousness, which point to the transcendent, and, indeed, often reverse natural symbolism indicating a sense that there is a supernatural solution to victimization⁴⁵. Next, he speaks of the "dreams of the morning" where we are less deeply asleep and dream in terms of a private language of symbols that is usually related to memories from our past. In the light of all this, Doran states that it is no small part of the task of psychic conversion to gain "access to *one's own* symbolic system, and through that system to one's affective habits and one's spontaneous apprehension of possible values"⁴⁶. He explains that is by recognizing that we are motivated by symbols that are at least partly expressions of victimization that we can become open to allowing this victimization be healed⁴⁷.

2.4. Cosmopolis and Small-Scale Communities of Place

Fourth, Doran's notion of psychic conversion leads him to an expanded notion of Lonergan's heuristic theory of history. This expansion brings Doran close

41 *Ibidem*, p. 239.

42 *Ibidem*, p. 59.

43 *Ibidem*, p. 85.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 85..

45 *Ibidem*, pp. 284-288.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 60.

47 In an explicitly theological Chapter 5 (*The Community of the Servant of God, ibidem*, pp. 108-138), Doran suggests that a central characteristic of the Christian church is to mediate anagogic symbols to culture.

to Northcott's analysis of the need for "small-scale communities of place"⁴⁸. As already indicated, Doran states that we respond to each level of the scale of values in a dialectical manner. Consequently, his account of the ideal line of progress involves a situation where the culture of a community that is in a state of progress exhibits a prudent balance between "anthropological constitutive meaning" and "cosmological constitutive meaning". Equally, he speaks of the need for social structures such as the economic and political systems on one side, and family life and civil society on the other, to be held in a dialectical balance. He explains this in terms of practical intelligence being held in balance with the dictates of intersubjectivity. As the title of the book indicates, the central focus of Doran's book, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, is to elaborate on this point⁴⁹.

Doran's analysis of the dialectic of culture is particularly innovative and warrants some explanation. He suggests that all that Lonergan explained about cultural values can be understood in terms of anthropological values. These have an origin in the breakthrough to theory of the ancient Greek philosophers, and of the ethics developed in terms of natural law and virtue. By contrast, he borrows from Eric Voegelin a notion of cosmological culture, which is predominant in indigenous societies. He explains:

cosmological truth is the discovery that direction in the movement of life lies in a harmony between human decisions and actions, on the one hand, and the rhythms and processes of nature, on the other hand, that is, in a synchronicity between culture and nature. Anthropological truth establishes by a more specialized reflection that the ultimate measure of human integrity is a reality beyond the cosmos.⁵⁰

In Doran's thinking this invoking of a notion of cosmological truth does not reject an appeal to natural law ethics, but rather expands on it. Doran's expanded account of nature is one where psyche and spirit need to be held in dialectical tension. This directly addresses the issue identified by Northcott, drawing on the insights of psychologists, of the importance of relating natural law to issues such as bodiliness and the education of our "empathic capacities" within family life and local community⁵¹. Doran next describes the importance of communities who strive to promote an "integral dialectic of culture". He explains, "the condition of the possibility of the relative integrity of the dialectic of community lies in genuine cultural values". He adds that such genuine values must include "the integral dialectic of cosmological and anthropological constitutive meaning"⁵².

Having developed these broad heuristic categories of progress, Doran offers a more specific analysis of how culture and social structures today exhibit decline as

48 M. S. Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*, Kindle location, 2045.

49 R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, Part Three (*Social Values and the Dialectic of Community*); Part Four (*Cultural Values and the Dialectic of Culture*).

50 *Ibidem*, p. 216.

51 M. S. Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*, Kindle locations, 2045, 3861-3874.

52 R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

well as progress⁵³. Here one notices a remarkable convergence with the thought of Northcott. Doran comments on the manner in which the globalisation of economic and political systems has been driven by cultural values that stress a distorted form of anthropological constitutive meaning. He explains, “an exclusively anthropological determination of culture is productive of that distortion of the dialectic of culture that is internally constitutive of modern imperialism”⁵⁴. He traces the origins of this imperialistic tendency in Western culture to the conflict between the “poets and the philosophers” ancient Greece and the tendency to reject the wisdom of the former when the latter broke through to cultural dominance. While Doran does not develop the point, his analysis of imperialism is consistent with most of what Northcott has to say about the environmental destructiveness of modern economic behaviour – as well as the philosophy that legitimates it.

Consequently, Doran believes that a significant dimension of the redemptive task of reversing decline and restoring progress in our globalizing world involves restoring an awareness of the need all cultures have – no matter how sophisticated – for expressions of cosmological constitutive meaning. Here he recalls that the psyche responds primarily to symbols and so his ethics takes on an aesthetic quality. He speaks of the importance of restoring a sense of symbol in human culture. He explains that in addition to such symbols representing a cosmological sensibility, we will also need symbols that express a sense of mystery that motivates the exercise of our pure desire to know – a characteristic of anthropological culture. Here again, while Doran does not expand on the point, his analysis is compatible with most of what Northcott writes about aesthetics and the importance of a sense of place. On this issue, Doran draws on the thinking of a historian of technology, Luis Mumford. He states, “the situation being addressed in our time is constituted by the option for the future that Lewis Mumford has called the option between post-historic and world-cultural humanity”⁵⁵. He suggests that this notion of a world-cultural humanity needs to be developed by extensive further enquiry, not least in the realm of economics. Doran’s vision of a world-cultural community includes a system of small-scale communities being coordinated in a variety of globalized ways.

Doran’s account of a world-cultural humanity is relatively brief and remains primarily at a cultural level. He describes how post-historical humanity attempts to “lock our psyches and imaginations and questioning spirit into ever more rigid straitjackets”. By contrast, he asserts, “world-cultural humanity would entail the building of a cross-cultural communitarian alternative” that would include “a process of intercultural dialogue and mutual enrichment that enjoys the diversities and frees us to grow”⁵⁶. He stresses that this kind of dialogue involves both our spirits and our psyches, describing “a process of intercultural dialogue and mutual

53 R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, Chapter 17 (*World-cultural Consciousness*), pp. 527-560.

54 *Ibidem*, p. 479.

55 R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, p. 37 (quoting L. Mumford, *The Transformations of Man* (or. ed. 1956), Gloucester (MA), Torchbook, 1978).

56 R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

enrichment that enjoys the diversities and frees us to grow, precisely by the process of ‘passing over’ into the differences of others and returning to our own difference enriched by what we have learned in the process”⁵⁷.

Finally, Doran invokes a notion of cosmopolis to describe the work of communities seeking to promote a world-cultural humanity⁵⁸. In a chapter entitled “Cosmopolis and the Dialectic of Community”, Doran cites Lonergan: “Cosmopolis is concerned with the fundamental issue of the historical process. Its business is to prevent practicality from being short-sightedly practical and so destroying itself”⁵⁹. One is left in no doubt that what Doran envisions is a form of “sacred cosmopolis”:

Cosmopolis undergoes a religious and theological transformation because, among the dimensions of the divinely organized solution to the problem of evil, and so among the constitutive features of a new law on earth liberating humanity for an existence that both transcends the vicissitudes of imperial order and disorder and transforms the situations to which the law of empire gives rise into conditions for an alternative form of existence, is the intellectual collaboration committed to an understanding of the whole of reality in the light of the accepted solution.⁶⁰

3. Conclusion

Both Northcott and Doran represent examples of what the editor of *Filosofia* describes when he states that “the problem of ecological crisis that arises nowadays has forced philosophy to break out of the classic schemes of modernity, developing new categories and a renewed philosophy of nature”. Northcott offers an impressive overview of the complex issues contributing to the ecological crisis and suggests that strategies to address this crisis will need to include an “ecological repretination of natural law ethics”⁶¹. He explores dimensions of what might be required in order to update medieval traditions of natural law and suggests that an appeal to developmental and evolutionary psychology may help with this project. This leads him to stress an aesthetic dimension to natural law thinking, one that respects the insights of indigenous cultures and, above all, is related to a sense of place.

The thought of Robert Doran helps to render the thought of Northcott more methodical and explanatory. Doran’s thought builds on that of Bernard Lonergan, whose notion of intellectual conversion already makes substantial progress toward providing what Northcott describes as largely absent from modern philosophy: “a transcendent ground for moral judgments”. Lonergan also provides a heuristic theory of history based on a metaphysics of an emergently probable universe that can be extended to ecological concerns and can guide the interdisciplinary nature

57 *Ibidem*, pp. 37-38.

58 *Ibidem*, Chapter 11 (*Cosmopolis and the Dialectic of Community*), pp. 55-386.

59 *Ibidem*, p. 357 (quoting B. Lonergan, *Insight*, cit., pp. 263-264).

60 R. M. Doran, *op. cit.*, pp. 356-357.

61 M. S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, cit., p. 309.

of the action needed to redress the ecological crisis. However, by adding a notion of “psychic conversion” to the task of self-appropriation, Doran introduces consequent notions of cosmological culture, aesthetics and the hermeneutics of symbol, that converge with what Northcott says about ethics and a sense of place.

More can be said on how these two authors might challenge and correct each other. Northcott’s thought can illustrate how important it is to add the thought of Doran to that of Lonergan and to apply the resulting body of thinking to ecological questions. Conversely, Doran’s thought can introduce a more methodically controlled and balanced approach to that of Northcott, who, at times, makes sweeping and inadequately grounded judgments. For example, by stressing the role of intellectual conversion as well as psychic conversion, Doran’s thought can help avoid any approach to ecological ethics that seems overly rejecting of the genuine progress that is present in modern developments in technology and economic systems. Doran’s thought can also help with two issues that could be the basis of a further study: exactly where does the boundary lie between philosophy and theology; and, how to dialectically evaluate the differing “Images of Nature” being provided in ecologically-conscious philosophy today.