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Book Review

Anders Melin, *Living with Other Beings: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to the Ethics of Species Protection* (Studies in Religion and the Environment; Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), 184pp., $44.95, ISBN: 978-3643904201.

Christian perspectives on the non-human have been in something of a state of flux in recent decades with the notion of stewardship coming under sustained pressure for several reasons. First, it seems rather anthropocentric and hierarchical. Second, it may be too flattering for humans and therefore in conflict with the ecologically pivotal notion of humility. Finally (and relatedly), we stewards seem to have been absentees for most of the history of life on Earth, making such a role seem redundant or at least unclear. Anders Melin's text is, in large measure, a response to the difficulty facing a stewardship approach. In spite of the subtitle, and in spite of the strong features mentioned below, it has very little to say about actual species protection and will not be of much direct help to anyone who is looking for a one-stop guide to the familiar ethical issues associated with culling, invasive species, and the problems of diversity.

Rather, the text is focused much more upon the normative dimensions of environmental ethics rather than the applied dimensions, upon deliberation about the right kind of conceptual framework for Christians rather than the nitty-gritty of standpoints that might shape public policy discussions. The preferred framework, itself, turns out to be a combination of two things: an extended conception of the common good drawn from the virtue theoretical tradition (and particularly from its Aristotelian wing), and an extended conception of a biblically sanctioned covenant as inclusive of more than a relation between God and man. These two traditions are thought to be in harmony with one another, and the fact that both are understood in an extended manner (the common good is not just to be thought of as a human good; the covenant includes non-human life) allows the position to work.

Of these two, the least controversial is the former. One of the key limitations of familiar sorts of anthropocentric ethics is not so much the exclusion of the non-human from consideration but rather the circumscribed manner in which consideration of non-human goods are allowed to be taken into account. This is particularly evident in animal ethics where it is almost universally accepted that animals have interests that are worthy of notice. However, taking such interests into account *as part of the common good* and not merely as *good for the animals concerned* is rather a different matter, and has been a focal point for recent work on animals and justice.

The second and more controversial extension (of the idea of a covenant) is at the heart of Melin's more distinctive contribution. The theologians Rosemary Radford Reuther and Michael S. Northcott have both pressed the ecological credentials of the

covenant tradition and the idea that the natural order is itself a moral order rather than something that man ought to be striving to rise above or to control. Robert Murray's idea of a 'cosmic covenant' is also part of this same mix. All three are flagged in the body of the text. However, such covenant approaches have tended (for obvious reasons) to stress the credentials that are supplied by the Old Testament. Melin, instead, believes that this same idea is also central to the New Testament. At its heart is the idea that other living beings are part of the covenant and that we should therefore show concern for them for their own sake, but also as part of the common good, rather than merely concern of a more instrumental or attenuated sort. As other beings are part of the covenant, we humans are not, then, to be thought of as the pinnacle of creation. Whatever happens to be true of us, whatever seems to be a reason for such a sense of superiority, might hold even more so in a comparison between ourselves and other beings already in existence elsewhere or in the future. The cosmic covenant idea also informs more metaphysically deep notions of God's being and revelation. Other creatures are equally a part of the latter and any eschatological consummation of life's drama will encompass them as well as us.

There are many threads worth picking up here and, to some extent, the reader is left hanging. I should have particularly liked to see a lot more work on the claim that such an extended covenant is present in the New Testament. However, given the book's normative theoretical focus it is understandable that rather than citations of chapter and verse what we get instead is a series of reasons why an ecological interpretation of the covenant tradition ought to be seen as a starting point for Christian environmental ethics, and, more specifically, Christian environmental virtue ethics. First, the approach recognizes the embeddedness of humans in nature with the result that harm to the latter returns to the former. Second, the idea of a cosmic covenant situates humans and human history as part of something greater, i.e. a larger story of the development of life here and throughout the universe. Third, it comes to grips with the difficulties associated with God's relation to the non-human as a relation that precedes and goes beyond his relation to ourselves. Fourth, this works well at a textual level with regard to both the Old and the New Testament, although, as noted, the latter is something of a promissory note still to be redeemed. Finally, it offers a substitute for a stewardship concept that seems now to face the intractable difficulties outlined above.

These are all significant considerations. The first responds to a classic ecological worry about Christianity associated with the Lynn White critique (and, indeed St. Francis does pop up in the early pages); the second points towards the pivotal role of humility; the third toward the importance of providing a story that ties in with what we know from science about actual evolutionary processes; the fourth helps to shift Christian engagement away from opportunist cherry picking from the Old Testament in support of dominance and control; and the fifth avoids the dangers of tying a Christian perspective to a metaphor now seen by many as problematic. We may, of course, wonder about many of these individual advantages and how deep they go. The third, for example, will only work well if certain aspects of the idea that nature tends towards harmony are abandoned, but that is an idea that, as Melin stresses, has precious little to support it in the way of evidence and ought to be dropped. We are not, then, here simply to fine-tune a system in which harmony is the dominant tendency and usual outcome. Relatedly, the God of this kind of ecotheology is a

humble God rather than an omnipotent host and puller of strings. As a result, hard decisions have to be made by ourselves without the comforting idea that we are simply performing routine maintenance.

This is where the idea of species protection does come in. As elsewhere in the virtue ethical tradition, universal norms have little work to do. Rather, reasons for action often tend to depend upon varying relationships to agents. Accordingly, charity rather than prudence is the dominant virtue. I do, however, wonder if this is entirely in line with the account of virtue ethics which is set out in the opening two chapters. In particular, the combination of Rosalind Hursthouse's virtue ethics, which is sometimes challenged, with a turn toward the sorts of universal norms characteristic of other normative theories. The prioritizing of charity over prudence, however, is very familiar Christian territory and draws a limit to the Aristotelian (and Hursthousian) reframing of Christian ethics. In line with the emphasis upon charity, relationality is taken by Melin to matter a great deal. This, in turn, implies that we humans have special responsibility for close relatives and, among those whose relation to us is more distant, we have reasons for prioritizing upon the basis of differing levels of sentience and rationality. (Because the latter are linked to varying morally relevant interests.) These are, of course, very familiar claims, and the responses to them are equally familiar: the consequences of such a view still look overly anthropocentric; rationality and/or sentience end up being fetishized; the privileged traits are graded into degrees in a way that we would never dream of doing when considering the standing of humans alone.

What this overall covenant framework will look like in detail, when applied to the key problems of species protection remains unclear but rather intriguing. Similarly, what an ecological (cosmic) covenant will look like when more attention is given to its presence in the New Testament is far from obvious. While, overall, the book is not quite what is suggested by its cover, it is a useful text and one that (especially in its later chapters) points toward productive future enquiry.

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