

EARTH'S LAMENT: SUFFERING, HOPE, AND WISDOM

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Colleagues, Junior Members, Distinguished Guests, Family, and Friends:

“It is astonishing how few traces of human suffering one notices in the history of philosophy.”ⁱ So commented Theodor Adorno in the mid-1960s, around the time ICS appointed as its first faculty member my predecessor Hendrik Hart, who has so generously introduced me tonight. I should like to reflect on Adorno’s perceptive comment. I want to ask why Western philosophy carries so few traces of human suffering. I also want to consider what a different philosophy would be like.

I shall be brief: about 25 minutes. I shall also be informal: no numbered propositions, and no technical commentaries on texts by other philosophers. My aim is to share some questions and passions that I bring to my position at ICS, and to do this at a high altitude in full view. Like a trapeze artist who performs without a net, I shall be doing philosophy without footnotes. I trust you to rescue me if I should fall!

1. Suffering, Hope, and Wisdom

Adorno’s comment points to the strongest motivations of his philosophy.ⁱⁱ Elsewhere in the same book he says, “The need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth” (ND 17-18/29). If Adorno is right; if the need to express suffering is indeed a condition of all truth, then an inability or unwillingness to address and articulate human suffering would cast doubt on the legitimacy of philosophy itself.

But such doubt goes even deeper. For human suffering does not occur in a vacuum. The earliest chapters in the Hebrew scriptures tell of a global catastrophe in which the afflictions borne by human beings arrive with a curse upon other creatures. After the first humans eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, all that had been created good is disrupted, not only human life but also the world humans inhabit. Similarly, St. Paul’s letter to the Romans says “the whole creation has been

groaning in labor pains until now" (Romans 8.22).ⁱⁱⁱ The groans of creation redouble in the inward moans of enslaved people.^{iv} Human beings participate in earth's lament. Human suffering and the destruction of creation go hand-in-hand. So do steps toward their removal. This is why, in the apocalyptic vision of St. John, the new earth sustains a fruit-bearing tree whose leaves "are for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22.2).

The close connection between human suffering and earth's lament poses an additional challenge for contemporary philosophy. Western philosophy has a long history of looking down on the nonhuman world. Not only is it astonishing how few traces of human suffering show up; it is equally remarkable how strongly this tradition has suppressed the groans of all creation. Yet human suffering and earth's lament continue, challenging contemporary philosophers to lend them a voice right within the sanitized halls of academia.

To meet this challenge, philosophers need both patient hope and comprehensive wisdom: patient hope for a new earth, and comprehensive wisdom about the shape of the old. In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, suffering never has the last word, even though suffering can last longer and go deeper than words can tell. Suffering and hope occur together. In Genesis, the woman's labor pains give way to the birth of a child (Genesis 4.1-2). In Revelation, the apocalyptic destruction of evil ushers in a "new earth" where God will live with human beings and "will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21.1-4). So too, in Romans the groans of God's children, as they await bodily liberation, arise from hope for an inexpressible future. St. Paul writes: "Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with patience" (Romans 8.24-25).^v Creation's deepest lamentations emerge from hope that things can be better in ways human beings can scarcely imagine. If the promise of

God's future were not received in hope, the need to express human suffering might disappear.

Comprehensive wisdom about the contemporary world is also required. Here we touch a sore spot in philosophy today. Western philosophy has long described itself, in the words of Plato's *Republic*, as a friend of wisdom and in love with truth. To be a true friend of wisdom, philosophy has tried to be comprehensive, gathering all of reality into one theoretical system. But philosophy today has given up that project. At most it seeks specialized insight into the world right now, not comprehensive wisdom about the world's past and future.^{vi} Hence philosophy has largely lost its speculative moment. It does not think out of hope, nor does it let intimations of a better future shape its comprehension of the present and past. Having lost touch with hope, and having abandoned the project of comprehensive wisdom, contemporary philosophy is not able to let suffering speak. And that inability casts doubt on philosophy's purported love for truth.

Currently, then, the philosophy invited by earth's lament is in short supply. Yet Adorno's work shows how a philosophy committed to truth can address the need to express suffering. And the reformational philosophy of Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, and their successors shows how a passion for comprehensive wisdom can arise out of hope for God's future. So let me explore with you the shape of a contemporary philosophy in which neither side is lacking, a philosophy committed to truth and passionate for comprehensive wisdom, a philosophy driven to express suffering out of hope for God's future. More specifically, let me discuss three topics: societal evil, spiritual struggle, and social critique.

2. Societal Evil

St. Augustine's dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will* gives a classic statement of what philosophers label "the problem of evil": If God is both all-powerful and entirely good, how can there be evil in the world? This question often arises as an argument against monotheistic faith such as one finds in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In response, Augustine distinguishes between evil that people do and evil that they undergo, between so-called "moral evil" and "natural evil," for example, between my murdering someone and my being severely burned in a forest fire caused by lightning. The dialogue concentrates on "moral evil" and makes human beings fully responsible for what they do.

Here Augustine, like many philosophers after him, simply overlooks the most difficult type of evil. The most difficult type is not moral evil, not the evil individuals do. Nor is it natural evil, the evil that happens to individuals because of circumstances entirely outside human control. Rather, the most difficult evil, difficult both to understand and to resist, is evil that seeps into cultural practices and social institutions, gathers strength over the years, and comes to dominate an entire societal formation. I call this type of evil "societal evil." Societal evil cannot be explained away as a natural occurrence outside human control. But it also cannot be ascribed to specific individuals or groups, as if it were solely their responsibility. It is distinct from natural evil and moral evil, although not unrelated to them. If contemporary philosophy does not address the topic of societal evil, it cannot do justice to either suffering or hope.

That is why Adorno's work is crucial for philosophers today. Without flinching, Adorno asks how philosophy is possible "after Auschwitz." He recognizes that the destruction viciously inflicted upon millions during the *Nazi Zeit* both defies and requires philosophical reflection. In my own terms, what happened in mid-century Europe, and what continues to happen in equally brutal ways around the world today, are

manifestations of societal evil. They are signs of evil that has seeped into our practices and institutions and gathered strength and come to dominate Western society.

Herman Dooyeweerd had some inkling of this when, writing about social reconstruction after World War Two, he said the future of Dutch society depended upon the outcome of an antithesis between two ground motives or spiritual forces.^{vii} In my judgment, however, Dooyeweerd neglected a societal evil that does not neatly stem from, say, Calvinists or Catholics or socialists or liberals. He was unable to plumb the depths of an evil in which every community is implicated and to which the very structure of society contributes. The reasons for his inability were both religious and philosophical.^{viii}

Religiously, the Kuyperian experience of antithesis had become so firmly tied to maintaining the community's own practices and institutions that even a great thinker like Dooyeweerd tended to equate the conflict between good and evil with a power struggle between concrete communities of commitment. Yet this tendency violates Dooyeweerd's own better insight when, for example, he says the spiritual antithesis "runs right through the Christian life itself" (*Roots* 3).

Philosophically, Dooyeweerd was unable to plumb the depths of societal evil in the West because he gave normative priority to structural differentiation in society. He turned the idea of sphere sovereignty—Abraham Kuyper's crucial contribution to modern social policy—into a creational principle that lies beyond critique. Hence Dooyeweerd could not seriously ask whether the Western differentiation of social institutions, such as government, business, and universities, might not itself embody and foster societal evil. When the historical process of differentiation becomes a structural hypernorm for evaluating social change, it becomes difficult to assess the environmental, cultural, and interpersonal costs of this process. They come to seem like mere "side effects" of a process considered intrinsically good, rather than potential signs of societal evil.

So what are contemporary philosophers in the tradition of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd to do? Should we reject "the antithesis" and embrace a global dialogue in which all religions become one? Should we give up the idea of sphere sovereignty as a once useful social policy whose time has passed? I do not see how either response would make us better able to recognize and address societal evil. Instead, reformational philosophers need to reexamine the connection between spiritual struggle and normative social critique. Let me make a few proposals in that regard.

3. Spiritual Struggle

By "spiritual struggle" I do not mean something otherworldly and disembodied. Rather I mean an ongoing struggle within cultural practices and social institutions for the direction in which a societal formation will head. It is as ordinary as the clothes we wear and the housing we inhabit. Yet it is all-embracing, and therefore extremely difficult to pin down. Augustine noted this struggle in his famous history of the conflict between the secular city and the city of God. So did Horkheimer and Adorno, in their formulation of a "dialectic of enlightenment," as did Karl Marx before them, in his accounts of social alienation and economic exploitation.

Religious thinkers are always tempted to place their own account of spiritual struggle on the right side of this battle. Yet it is precisely the character of spiritual struggle that such self-legitimation can never be fully justified. For the struggle always exceeds anyone's contribution to it, and any contribution can go in a different direction than the one envisioned. Perhaps this helps explain why Hegel said ultimate judgment in the struggle among nations belongs to a universal world spirit: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* (World history is the world's court of justice—see EPR § 340, p. 371). Unfortunately Hegel's dialectical forest obscures the tree whose leaves "are for the healing of the nations." Yet the grandeur of his narrative corrects the blindness of right-wing

Christians who identify specific countries as an "evil empire" or an "axis of evil." I dare say such parochial and politically motivated identifications are themselves signs of societal evil.

Precisely because there is societal evil, philosophers must come to grips with spiritual struggle. We must ask in which direction our society is headed. Is it headed toward a new earth in which justice and peace embrace? Or does its direction simply prolong and intensify earth's lament? Further, in the context of such global questions, we must ask about specific practices and institutions in their current constellations. To what extent does the art we promote or the schooling we provide or the government we support bear the promise of God's future? If we conclude that the contemporary societal formation is fundamentally misdirected, then reform measures will never be enough. Society as a whole will need to be transformed. And this can occur only through a prolonged spiritual struggle to which our own contributions can only be modest and inherently flawed.

4. Social Critique

If we left matters at this comprehensive level, however, the shape of societal evil would still be vague. Philosophical wisdom must be more precise. Otherwise reflections on society's direction evaporate into either abstract utopias or debilitating despair. They become abstractly utopian when we project the vision of a new earth beyond contemporary society without any idea of how this vision could be pursued. Alternatively, our reflections turn into dirges of despair when we overlook what is already good in contemporary society. Indeed, utopianism and despair are reverse images of each other. Both are comprehensive critiques lacking concrete wisdom.^{ix}

"Concrete wisdom" is an embodied understanding of societal principles and their practical operation. By "societal principles" I mean fundamental expectations that

commonly hold for people and that people hold in common. These expectations hold and are held in the context of historically developed cultural practices and social institutions. Economic resourcefulness, political justice, and ethical solidarity are examples of such principles at work in contemporary Western society. This does not imply, however, that societal principles are unchanging absolutes. I see them rather as "shared reference points that have emerged historically through clashes between societies and within them."^x They are what Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd call "norms."^{xi} Societal principles such as political justice are historically constituted and future-oriented callings in which the voice of God can be heard and traces of a new earth can appear. But they are not available to us without spiritual struggle amid suffering and evil.

That fact prompts two additional comments about the task of social critique. First, no easy distinction can be made out between the structure of human societies and their direction, nor between legitimately pursuing valid societal principles and inadvertently fostering societal evil. Yet, second, the notion of societal evil makes little sense apart from an idea of what is societally good.^{xii} And an idea of societal good must appeal to societal principles that are currently in effect, principles that the philosopher finds valid and worth pursuing.

If contemporary philosophers wish to let human suffering speak—if we wish to lend a voice to earth's lament—then we must offer a comprehensive and normative critique of societal evil. We must offer this critique out of hope for a future that comprehends us much more than we comprehend it. We may not pretend that our own claims about justice or peace do not themselves participate in societal evil. But we also may not act as if societal evil is so powerful and pervasive that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not always already becoming the tree of global healing.

5. Earth's Lament

Perhaps an image will help. What I have said about philosophy's task resonates with the sculpture whose photographic reproduction appears on tonight's program. I invite you to look at that image now, and to view the sculpture itself at the reception afterwards.^{xiii}

You will see a brilliantly illuminated sculpture standing on nine blocks of wood. A young corkscrew willow has been cut off before it could flourish. Its dead leaves have been removed, its bare branches disassembled. Now it stands forcibly reconstructed, twisting through a skeletal cage of whittled maple. The willow's branches, carved into spears, are rejoined with sharp wooden rivets into the simulacrum of a tree. Snakelike, they writhe through each other as their trunk rests rootless in a nest of interlaced twigs. Cemented sand fills the nest—blasted soil



Earth's Lament (2003) by Joyce A. Recker,
used with permission

where something once grew. Greying rocks, circling the tree trunk like petrified eggs, are all that remain. The gnarled but youthful branches of this caged and nested tree spiral upward toward an elevation they will never reach.

This sculpture, by Joyce Recker, is titled "Earth's Lament." In its stark complexity, it offers an open-ended metaphor for hope amid loss, for renewal amid destruction. The philosophy I have sketched tonight attempts a more prosaic articulation of a similar

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vision. Like this sculpture, it would glimpse the tree of healing within the cage of societal evil. It would lend a voice to human suffering. It would provide echoes of earth's lament.

- Lambert Zuidervaart, Toronto - November 21, 2003 (Used by permission)

Explanatory Remark

The appendix and endnotes that follow are not part of the spoken text. They provide additional information or ideas that exceeded the limits of a brief public lecture. The author hopes to publish a longer version of this talk that addresses the philosophical literature and arguments in greater detail.

Appendix on Societal Principles

Let me briefly show how my emphases on the historical embeddedness, the eschatological openness, and the vocational character of societal principles revise the notion of "norm" in Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. First, although I agree with them that societal principles require human formation, I do not think that societal principles are in effect prior to their formation. A societal principle such as political justice is itself a continually contested and historically unfolded outworking of the flourishing to which human beings are called within the fabric of their cultural practices and social institutions.

My second revision is to suggest that societal principles were not simply given or fixed when human beings were created. Not only do these principles emerge during the course of human history but also they could change dramatically, in ways we cannot foresee, in God's inexpressible future. We do not know now what political justice might require in the new earth. So we must always hold this principle open for what we do not know.

My third revision is to claim that the human ability to make logical distinctions is not definitive for the nature of societal principles. Rather the ability to distinguish, say, between justice and injustice itself manifests something deeper. It manifests an instruction and invitation and guidance that comes to societally constituted human

beings from outside themselves and continually calls for their response.^{xiv} In that sense, none of the patterns and conditions that hold for other creatures are straightforward laws for human life. They are callings that always require societally constituted responses. Where our responses foster illness and poverty or destroy habitats, we are collectively responsible, not simply for the consequences of our practices and institutions but also for the societal principles according to which these are organized and maintained.

Notes:

ⁱParaphrased from Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 153; *Negative Dialektik* (1966, 1967), in *Gesammelte Schriften* 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 156. Internal citations give page numbers from the Ashton translation, followed by the pagination in *Gesammelte Schriften* 6, thus: ND 153/156. I modify the translation as needed without notation.

ⁱⁱI develop this interpretation in the essay "Metaphysics after Auschwitz: Suffering and Hope in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*" (forthcoming).

ⁱⁱⁱAll scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Edition.

^{iv}This is a corollary to the "cultural amplification of creation" that Seerveld correctly identifies as article 1, so to speak, in what he calls "The Biblical Charter for Artistic Activity in a Christian Community." See Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), pp. 20-41.

^vAccording to the next verse, the Spirit intercedes on behalf of those who groan in hope and does so "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8.26).

^{vi}Arguably Hegel was the last major philosopher to pursue such comprehensive wisdom. He called philosophy "*its own time comprehended in thoughts*" and cautioned against trying to transcend the contemporary world toward a future world "*as it ought to be.*" See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 21-22. Cited in text as EPR.

^{vii}Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options* (1945-48), trans. John Kraay, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, newly edited by D. F. M. Strauss (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003). Cited in text as *Roots*. The Dutch version of this book appeared in 1959, and the first English translation appeared in 1979.

^{viii}For a longer discussion that puts Dooyeweerd into conversation with recent Radical Orthodoxy, see my essay "Good Cities, or Cities of the Good? Radical Augustinians, Societal Structures, and Normative Critique" (forthcoming).

^{ix}This might help explain why many intellectuals of my generation, having come of age during the 1960s when hopes for a better future ran high, turned to nihilism when those hopes shattered.

^xFrom chapter 4 ("Truth as Disclosure") in Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004 (in press)]. This chapter uses a critical discussion of Heidegger to develop an idea of truth as "a process of life-giving disclosure marked by fidelity to the commonly holding and commonly held."

^{xi}Unlike Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, however, I emphasize the historical embeddedness, the eschatological openness, and the vocational character of societal principles. See the appendix below for a brief account of these emphases. Dooyeweerd distinguishes between "laws" and "norms," defining the latter as "rules of what ought to be" (*Roots*, pp. 69, 75). Vollenhoven distinguishes among "laws," "norms," and "principles." By "principles" he means the results of human attempts to formulate diverse "functional laws," laws that have norming character by virtue of their holding for logical or post-logical functions in which human beings can always distinguish between their own activities and the laws that hold for those activities. See "Norm and Law of Nature" (1951) in *Dirk H. T. Vollenhoven Reader*, introductions and translations by John H. Kok (Manuscript, 1998), pp. 103-111. My term "societal principles" is closer to Vollenhoven's usage than to Dooyeweerd's.

^{xii}As Vollenhoven says, good and evil stand in an antithetical relation such that one side fundamentally and inescapably opposes the other. See his discussion of good and evil in "Introducing Philosophy," *Dirk H. T. Vollenhoven Reader*, pp. 220-25.

^{xiii}My description of the sculpture "Earth's Lament" borrows freely from the conclusion to chapter 10 ("Aesthetic Transformations") in Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004 (in press)].

^{xiv}Here I develop clues from Vollenhoven's distinction between the "summation" of God's law—love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves—and the "differentiation" of this law into diverse laws for different functions in human life. I combine this with his Trinitarian distinction among three relationships that God sustains with creation: (1) creating and structuring, (2) speaking and word-revealing, and (3) leading or guiding. See the essays "Norm and Law of Nature" (1951) and "The Unity of Life" (1955) in VR, pp. 103-111 and 146-56, respectively. Nevertheless, I take issue with Vollenhoven's emphasis, shared with Dooyeweerd, on logical functioning as the level of human activity that explains why certain laws have "norming character," such that they require formulation as "principles." Hendrik Hart lays some groundwork for the position I am advocating when he discusses humankind as that community which in relation to other realms of creatures "is called to be an agent for the direction of the world." But I find his accounts of responsibility and evil too focused on the agency of "persons." See the chapter "The Special Place of Humanity" in *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 267-324; quotation from p. 279.