

**RESISTING  
STRUCTURAL EVIL**

**LOVE AS ECOLOGICAL-  
ECONOMIC VOCATION**

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*materials, electronic products, car parts. Which of India's urban poor were forced into the city by mines that provide the aluminum in my life?*

*I learned too of people in the Global North "swimming upstream" to counter this injustice, guided by their contacts among the Indian tribal people. The Indian church leader worked for a rural development project sponsored by the United Evangelical Church in India. He and this organization, together with many other NGOs, were assisting the people in their appeals to churches in the mining companies' host countries. The hope was that the churches would urge the companies to cease the mining operations, and urge their governments to divest from those companies. The church of Norway and the Norwegian government were the first to respond. Following an extensive study by its ethics council, Norway's pension fund (the world's second-largest sovereign wealth fund), sold 13.2 million US-dollars' worth of shares in Vedanta Resources, a British mining company working in Orissa, due to the "systematic" environmental and human rights failures including "forced relocation" of indigenous tribes.*

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Awareness that all was not well between people like me and many of the world's impoverished people dawned in me through a film. It was shown to a Lutheran youth group, Luther League, when I was fourteen years old. I watched, aghast, as the film depicted the harsh exploitation of sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic and their ensuing suffering. Lines were sharply portrayed between these workers' nearly insufferable reality and the vast profits made by corporate owners of the sugar industry located in my country. Equally clear and even more troubling to me was the connection between those workers' suffering and what we North Americans eat. I soon learned, to my horror, that this was but one instance in the complex webs of exploitation enabling our extravagant acquisition and consumption.

Years of activism followed. I believed that if the people of my country simply knew what was on the other end of their material wealth, their consumption patterns would change. But merely knowing, I learned, was not enough to enable radical social change toward justice. The chains that bind us into systemic exploitation of others and of the Earth are intricate and cleverly hidden. These chains, however, can be broken and transformed. The world is full of people doing just that. In these pages, we examine these chains as "structural evil," forces that bind our power to live in ways that "love neighbor as self" and to protect Earth's wellbeing. These forces include intricate

webs of interrelated power arrangements, ideologies, values, practices, policies, and ways of perceiving reality that span generations and have unintended snowballing consequences.

The language of evil, especially structural or systemic evil, may be misinterpreted in a sense that would severely undermine central points of this book. By structural evil, I do *not* refer to metaphysical forces beyond human agency. To the contrary, while structural evil may be beyond the power of individuals to counter, it is composed of power arrangements and other factors that are humanly constructed and therefore may be dismantled by other human decisions and collective actions.

Facing the structural evil in which one is implicated is dangerous and defeating unless one also explores ways to resist it and dismantle it. Herein, therefore, we also uncover pathways for gaining freedom from "structural evil." They are paths toward a world more oriented around justice and sustainable Earth-human relations.

I write, then, to confront a contradiction and a question of morality that have haunted me since I was fourteen: This land is replete with profoundly caring human beings, motivated not only by self-interest but also by infinite wellsprings of compassion and by desire for justice and goodness. And yet everyday life, a "good life" in the United States, entails consumption, production, and acquisition patterns that threaten Earth's capacity to sustain life as we know it, and exploit vast numbers of people worldwide, some even unto death. Our ways of life and the economic policies that make them possible, contribute to severe, even deadly, poverty and ecological degradation on massive scales. This assertion may seem untenable or outrageous to readers not familiar with it. I ask only that you allow it to unfold in the pages of this book, and especially in the life stories spread throughout. This link between our relative affluence and the poverty of many, I refer to as "economic violence." The ecological aspects of it—introduced below—constitute "ecological violence."

With climate change, economic and the ecological violence fuse. Law Professor Amy Sinden writes regarding climate change: "The haves of the world are responsible for the vast majority of the greenhouse gases that have already accumulated, and yet it is the have-nots who are likely to bear the brunt of its effects. . . this crisis divides us both in terms of culpability and vulnerability."<sup>1</sup>

The devastating hand of economic violence is not limited to other lands. It strikes incessantly in the US as well, and has been all the more virulent with the rise of neoliberal economic globalization in the late 1970's through today.



These are the creatures called to love neighbor as self. Any theology and ethic of neighbor-love will be tested by its power to move these “mud creatures” toward lives that serve the widespread good. I contend that we, the uncreators, will live that love into the world to the extent that we reconceptualize the Christian moral norm of “neighbor-love” from being primarily an interpersonal vocation to being also an economic-ecological vocation.

### NEIGHBOR-LOVE IN AND FOR THE HOUSEHOLD OF EARTH

The God revealed in Jesus is a living God, engaged with the creatures and elements of Earth. The expression of God’s engagement, divine love, responds to the realities of history. That love is not stagnant or heedless of the dynamic evolving nature of life’s needs. God’s love re-forms human love in response to where and how the world hungers for love’s healing and liberating hand. The escalating destruction of Earth’s life systems in our day and the resulting human suffering cry out for new forms of love’s expression. We are called to love (that is, serve the well-being of) the other-than-human parts of God’s beloved creation, as well as the human.

This expanded scope of neighbor-love is not new with eco-theology and ecological ethics. Three decades before eco-theology emerged, H. Richard Niebuhr, queried: “Who finally is my neighbor, the companion whom I have been commanded to love as myself?” “My neighbor,” he responds, is “animal and inorganic being . . . all that participates in being.”<sup>4</sup> *Hesed*, argues Bernard Brady in discussing love in the Hebrew Bible, is not limited to people.<sup>5</sup>

Extending the boundaries of neighbor-love beyond the human opens potholes the size of caverns. In what ways and to what extent does “neighbor-love” apply beyond humankind to the rest of nature? How? As object of love? As agent of love? As vessel of divine love? Biblical texts, read with ecological lenses, intimate all of these.

And what of justice? If neighbor-love demands justice, then to rethink the former is to rethink the latter. Feminist liberationist theories of justice insist that theories of justice start with injustice as described by those experiencing it. If the *polis* is planetary, how do we begin to consider the notion that we must hear voices of the Earth if we wish to understand more fully the injustices it suffers? How are we to perceive the cries and constructive proposals of waters, winds, and critters whose languages we do not yet know? The mode of knowing in modernity, reason, has proven inadequate. The mode of knowing in Western pre-modernity, revelation uncritically appropriated, proved deadly. Epistemology for the ecological era will incorporate and go beyond both; we

will “learn to learn from” other-than-human parts of creation. We will seek to glimpse reality as experienced by otherkind.

The leap of expanding neighbor-love and justice beyond the human is not so vast where Earth’s well-being is understood as a requirement for human well-being. But the implications of neighbor-love for the other-than-human are murkier when that move is grounded in the *intrinsic* worth of the other-than-human, rather than solely in its *utilitarian* worth to humankind. Questions of relative worth emerge, as do questions of what criteria determine where love is due. If all is neighbor and intrinsic moral worth abides in the other-than-human, how do we measure and compare moral worth? Moral obligations to a dog may be relatively easy to consider. But how, short of arbitrary opinion, do we distinguish between the moral claims of a dog and a fly? What moral constraints ought to be placed on human beings in light of our dependence upon and kinship with otherkind? On what grounds do specific moral values and obligations apply differently to human neighbors than to other-than-human neighbors? More perplexing is the question raised earlier of whether moral agency extends beyond the human to other members of biotic communities. Are we the only ethical species?<sup>6</sup>

And what of predation and plant life? We cannot eat without killing other life forms and destroying habitats of still others. Moreover we are creatures in a chain of life that by nature, includes not only predation but predation that causes suffering.<sup>7</sup> The call to expand the scope of neighbor-love beyond the human is not a call to see the rest of nature as a model of morality.

Nor can love for nature be based on anthropomorphic ideas. Lisa Sideris points out the problem of ecological ethics that call for loving nature in the same way that we love human beings. Loving human beings includes valuing and protecting the life of each individual, including the vulnerable on which other people might prey. Yet, basic biological sciences reveal the danger to ecosystems and therefore their living creatures, if humans were to protect most undomesticated animals from their predators.<sup>8</sup>

Neighbor-love as an interpersonal and economic norm has two faces: compassion and justice. Neighbor-love as an ecological norm adds a third: Earth’s well-being. We have only begun to uncover the conundrums inherent this third face of love in love. The challenge of re-theorizing love as an ecological vocation is a weighty and morally compelling challenge for religion of the early twenty-first century.