

Chapter 1: Nature and God

At the turn of the eighteenth century one of the most controversial books in Europe was Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*.<sup>1</sup> First published in English in two volumes in 1684 and 1690, Burnet's *Theory* was at the storm center of the era's disputes about religion and science in the same way Galileo's work had been decades before.

Burnet argued that the common understanding of Noah's flood was fundamentally mistaken. There was, on the common understanding, a forty-day "Deluge of Water" that "overspread the Face of the Whole Earth, from Pole to Pole, and from *East* to *West*, and that in such Excess, that the Floods over-reacht the Tops of the highest Mountains."<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the waters subsided, the mountains and fields reappeared, and Noah's descendants began to re-inhabit the world that had been temporarily flooded.

That story couldn't be true, Burnet argued, because there simply wasn't enough water.

If the flood reached above all the highest mountains of the entire world, there would have had to be unbroken global ocean that was more than a mile higher than current sea-levels. The volume of water, moreover, would have had to increase its rate of growth as sea-levels rose, since the surface area of a sphere increases as the sphere expands. Burnet calculated that this would require "a Quantity of Water eight times as great" as what all the oceans currently contain.<sup>3</sup> But where would all this water come from?

There are two sources on our planet: bodies of water such as seas and lakes, and clouds. The seas and lakes could not contribute to the rise in sea-level, since any water moved from one body of water would have to be replaced by water from somewhere else. "If you have two Vessels to fill, and you empty one to fill the other, you gain nothing by that, there still remains one Vessel empty."<sup>4</sup> The clouds supply rain, but no rate of cloud-fed rainfall could produce eight oceans of water in forty days. That would take a constant torrent of at least forty years, which the clouds could not contain.

There's another problem as well. Even if we suppose that much water did fall on the earth, there can be no accounting for where it all went. According to the common understanding, "the Earth was dry and habitable" only four or five months later.<sup>5</sup> But there would have been no place for the water to drain into, since every cavity and channel would have already been inundated. The story is thus "impossible and unintelligible upon a double Account, both in requiring more Water than can be found, and more than can be disposed of if it was found."<sup>6</sup>

After establishing that the common understanding of Noah's flood conflicts with what science plainly tells us, Burnet draws the only logical conclusion: at the time of Noah's flood, the entire surface of the earth must have been perfectly "smooth and uniform"—like an egg—so that it could "easily be overflowed, and the Deluge performed with less Water."<sup>7</sup>

Before the flood, a person who had traveled all over the world would "not meet with a Mountain or a Rock."<sup>8</sup> "[T]here was no Sea there, no Mountains, nor Rocks, nor broken Caves, 'twas all one continued and regular Mass, smooth, simple, and compleat, as the first Works of Nature use to be."<sup>9</sup> Everything was as flat as "the face of the calmest Sea."<sup>10</sup> Burnet calls his theory of antediluvian geography the "Doctrine of the *Mundane Egg*."<sup>11</sup> Before the flood, the

ground everywhere was as even and regular as the shell of an egg, with all the world's water encased underground (like an egg's albumen) between the flat surface and a hard inner core.

The mundane egg was a marvel of divine architecture, the "whole Globe of the Water vaulted over, and the exterior Earth hanging above the Deep, sustain'd by nothing but its own Measures and Manner of Construction: A Building without Foundation or Corner-stone."<sup>12</sup> The era of egg-world was most wonderful, a golden age of human history.

In this smooth Earth were the first Scenes of the World, and the first Generations of Mankind; it had the Beauty of Youth and blooming Nature, fresh and fruitful, and not a Wrinkle, Scar or Fracture in all its body; no Rocks nor Mountains, no hollow Caves, nor gaping Channels, but even and uniform all over. And the Smoothness of the Earth made the Face of the Heavens so too; the Air was calm and serene; none of those tumultuary Motions and Conflicts of Vapours, which the Mountains and the Winds cause in ours:

'Twas suited to a golden Age, and to the first Innocency of Nature.<sup>13</sup>

Egg-world was paradise. And egg-world was beautiful: proportionate, regular, uniform, ordered, simple, geometrically perfect.

But humans were sinful, and punishment followed. The smooth outer shell cracked. "[T]he Frame of the Earth was torn in pieces, as by an Earthquake."<sup>14</sup> Massive fragments fell onto the water that had been beneath the surface, causing tsunamis so large and widespread that for a time the entire planet was covered by water. When the waters later rushed in to fill the lower places, they swept "Woods, Buildings [and] Living Creatures" with them, carrying it "all headlong into the great gulph."<sup>15</sup> This created scars on the land, and additional debris. Massive fragments came to rest in all sorts of postures, chaotically, some close to upright, others at different angles, forming mountains and canyons, islands, rocks, and crevices.

The geological features we see today are the consequences of that cataclysm. By that "fatal Blow, the Earth fell out of that regular Form, wherein it was produced at first, into all these Irregularities which we see in its present Form and Composition."<sup>16</sup> Everything on the face of the planet that is a departure from egg-like smoothness is the result of God's punishment of "the Wickedness and Degeneracy of Men."<sup>17</sup>

Egg-world was beautiful. Our world is not. What we inhabit is rough and unsightly, monstrous, rude and irregular, disordered, disproportioned, ghastly. We traverse a scene of dislocation and dissolution, with broken pieces of the earth "scatter'd like Limbs torn from the rest of the Body."<sup>18</sup> Nature is a vast array of deformity, ugliness caused by human sin. Our mountains and valleys and seas and chasms "have the true Aspect of a World lying in its Rubbish."<sup>19</sup> "[S]ay but they are a *Ruin*, and you have in one Word explained them all."<sup>20</sup>

John Locke didn't cherish wilderness any more than Burnet.

In 1690, about the same time as Burnet's *Sacred Theory*, Locke published his *Second Treatise of Government*. Chapter V of the *Second Treatise* addresses a crucial question. God gave the earth to all of humanity. The land's benefits were originally bestowed on every human. But the land is now owned by some and not by others. A few rich individuals control huge swaths, from which the multitudes of poor are excluded. If God gave the land to in common to all of humanity, how can the current state of land ownership possibly be justified?

It can be justified, according to Locke, because God intended for the earth to be of maximal benefit to all humans. And, crucially, the earth produces its greatest benefits when cultivated. People thus do God's will when they work the land—when they "subdue the Earth"

and by so doing “improve it for the benefit of life.”<sup>21</sup> It is by working the land that a person gains ownership of it. For every person owns himself, owns his body. It follows that every person owns the labor of his own body. When a person works the land, he mixes his labor into it. Cultivated land contains the labor of the person who cultivated it. Since the person owns his labor, it follows that he now owns the land. The prospect of gaining ownership of the land by cultivating it is, as well, a salutary incentive to improve the land for humanity’s benefit.

There is much to say about Locke’s theory of land appropriation. The point I wish to highlight is that on his view, land is valuable just to the extent that it benefits human beings. The more benefits the land produces—the more “conveniences” or “provisions” it provides—the more valuable it is. Land’s value “depends only on [its] usefulness to the life of man.”<sup>22</sup> And the benefits of wilderness are miniscule in comparison to the benefits of land that is cultivated. An acre of farmland in Devonshire is a hundred times more valuable than an “equally fertile” acre of “wild woods and cultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry.”<sup>23</sup> Wilderness is “almost worthless.”<sup>24</sup> The “benefit of it amount[s] to little more than nothing.”<sup>25</sup> “Ninety-nine-hundredths” of the value of land is “wholly to be put on the account of labour” rather than to what “is purely owing to Nature.”<sup>26</sup>

When Burnet looked at wilderness he saw deformity—an originally beautiful earth that had been ruined by sin. Locke didn’t seem to care about beauty or ugliness. The land’s productivity was all that mattered to him. But Locke too denigrated wilderness. The pejorative distinctive of Burnet’s attitude toward nature was “ruin.” The pejorative distinctive of Locke’s was “waste.” A place that has not been “improved” by human cultivation is a “waste land.”<sup>27</sup> “Land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste.”<sup>28</sup> All the wild woods of America are but “uncultivated waste.”<sup>29</sup> Locke recognized nothing to cherish in wilderness. Uncultivated nature was wasted, something God wished us to alter for human benefit.<sup>30</sup>

Many today hold views of nature diametrically opposed to Burnet and Locke. Many today think of rugged mountains, old growth forests, and ancient grassland as the earth’s most precious places. Wilderness is not a ruin, not a waste. It is unspoiled. Uncultivated nature, at least in certain circles, has enjoyed a hundred and eighty degree revaluation. It is now taken to be of great intrinsic value, the height of beauty.

This contemporary appreciation of nature has a rich philosophical heritage: from the contemporary view of positive aesthetics, which affirms the beauty of all things wild; to the environmental philosophies of Leopold and Muir; to the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau; to Humboldt’s scientific holism; to the Romanticism of Wordsworth in England and Goethe in Germany.

Shaftesbury was instrumental in initiating this modern revaluation of nature. Shaftesbury knew well the works of Locke and Burnet.<sup>31</sup> But Shaftesbury’s attitude toward nature was like ours, not theirs. He loved the “original Wilds” (C 2.217). He thought all things untouched by human influence were “beauteous in themselves” (C 2.217). Everywhere he looked he saw “*Master-pieces* in NATURE,” sources of intense “Delight” (C 2.224; 2.164). As one of his characters puts it, “The Wildness pleases” (C 2.217).

In the chapter that follows, I elucidate Shaftesbury’s pivotal view of nature. We see that Shaftesbury’s view emerged as a solution to a problem he took to be of the deepest philosophical

and personal importance: the problem of how worship of God can be both transportingly emotional and entirely rational.

---

<sup>1</sup> The definitive account of Burnet's work and its influence, both positive and negative, is Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London: T. Osborn et al., 1759), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 21-2. Some might claim that the Flood was a miracle, that God contravened the laws of nature by creating new waters "to make the Deluge, and then annihilated them again when the Deluge was to ease" (Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 23). Burnet wanted no part of such miraculous explanations. He sought "to give an Account of these Phaenomena" that coheres with the rest of our understanding of nature (Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 38). The deus ex machina of a miracle is not an explanation but a failure to explain. To resort to a miracle, moreover, is to discredit God, for it is to imply that God's original design of the world was imperfect, in need of ad hoc alteration. "We think him a better Artist that makes a Clock that strikes regularly at every Hour from the Springs and Wheels which he puts in the Work, than he that hath so made his Clock that he must put his Finger to it every Hour to make it strike" (Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 131-2). As we'll see, Burnet's opposition to miracles was a great positive antecedent of Shaftesbury.

<sup>7</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 174 and 36.

<sup>8</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 214.

<sup>10</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 341.

<sup>12</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 88.

<sup>15</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Burnet, *Sacred Theory*, 156.

<sup>21</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatise of Government and A Letter concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (Oxford University Press, 1690/2003), 113 (Second Treatise § 32).

<sup>22</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 115 (Second Treatise § 37).

<sup>23</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 116 (Second Treatise § 37).

<sup>24</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 119 (Second Treatise § 43).

<sup>25</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 118 (Second Treatise § 42).

<sup>26</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 117 (Second Treatise § 40).

<sup>27</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 115 (Second Treatise § 36).

<sup>28</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 118 (Second Treatise § 42).

<sup>29</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 116 (Second Treatise § 37).

<sup>30</sup> While Burnet and Locke might both believe uncultivated wilds can only be improved by cultivation, Locke's view of human nature differs from Burnet's. On Burnet's lapsarian view, humans were originally created entirely good and have since the Fall become entirely corrupt. Locke has a more complex, ambivalent view of human nature, thinking that pre-civilized people were in some ways better and in some ways worse. See, for instance, Locke, *Two Treatises*, 39 (First Treatise § 58). For Locke, movement towards civilization is not entirely a value-gain with regard to human nature, even if it is a value-gain with regard to the land.

<sup>31</sup> As I discussed in the introduction, Shaftesbury had a close personal relationship with Locke but disagreed with much of Locke's philosophy. I discuss Shaftesbury's view of Locke's philosophy in chapters 2 and 3. For full accounts of Shaftesbury's objections to Locke, see Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 98-149; Friedrich A. Uehlein, "Whichcote, Shaftesbury and Locke: Shaftesbury's Critique of Locke's Epistemology and Moral Philosophy," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 5 (2017), 1031-1048; Tim Stuart-Buttle, *From Moral Theology to Moral Philosophy: Cicero and Visions of Humanity from Locke to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 89-117. As far as I can tell, Shaftesbury did not have any personal connection with Burnet, but he owned a copy of Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*, and it is extremely likely that he was aware of *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*. For discussion of Burnet's possible influence on Shaftesbury's moral theory (and on Shaftesbury's rejection of Lockean philosophy), see Ernest Tuveson, "The Origins of the 'Moral Sense,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 11 (1948): 241-59.