

**O Lord, Our Heavenly King***Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

O Lord, our heavenly King,  
 Thy name is all divine;  
 Thy glories round the earth are spread,  
 And o'er the heavens they shine.

Lord, what is worthless man,  
 That thou shouldst love him so?  
 Next to thine angels he is placed,  
 And lord of all below.

Now rich thy bounties are,  
 And wondrous are thy ways!  
 In us O let thy power frame  
 A monument of praise!

**ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ***In the Nick of Time***God, Creation, and Humanity, Part 10: Prudential Choices***Kevin T. Bauder*

Buying a HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) home can be a great money saver at the time of purchase, but it comes with a cost in labor. I bought one in 1998, and among its other problems it had a bathroom that sorely needed attention. The fixtures were old and worn. The plumbing was leaking. The walls were decaying. What once had been a useful room had slowly sunk into disorder. Something needed to be done.

In the end, I chose to replace everything. I took the walls right down to the studs. I pried out the old cast-iron tub. I removed the aging WC. The only thing that I left in place was the tiled floor.

As I worked, the room was a mess, heaped with rubble. I nearly despaired of getting the heavy old tub out the door. My wife, who had never witnessed remodeling, experienced moments of discouragement in which she wondered whether she would ever have a truly functional bathroom.

In the process of remodeling, I threw away some items that could still have been used. The old ceramic sink that hung on the wall could have stayed there, but it left no room for a vanity. To make improvements, some of the older things had to go, not because they weren't useful, but because they weren't as useful or as beautiful as something else could be.

Only when the room had been gutted did I begin to improve it. I ran new plumbing and wiring. I hung new drywall, installed new fixtures, taped, bedded, and painted the walls, and added new cabinetry. In the end we had a useful and appealing room.

When our home was built, our bathroom enjoyed a significant level of order. Over time, that order diminished until it had to be restored to order. But before I could bring the room back to order, I had to destroy what was there, resulting in temporary disorder.

My bathroom remodeling project is a metaphor for human dominion over creation. Left to itself, the natural world tends toward disorder. The created world does not sustain itself permanently, especially since the introduction of sin into the world. Human management is required to maintain or enhance the order and beauty of creation. Often, however, humans who are



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 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

managing creation discover that they must temporarily decrease order at specific times and places before they can increase the order.

When and where to do this is not usually a moral choice, but a prudential one. In fact, most of the choices that people make in their use of the natural world are prudential rather than moral. Shall we tear down one thing so that we might enjoy another? Shall we decrease beauty to increase utility? May we ever choose to displace some other part of creation, perhaps another species? While some broad moral principles do affect such choices (and we have discussed several of those principles in the preceding essays), the choices are most often matters of prudence.

What makes prudential choices difficult is that often they are not choices between clear goods and clear evils but choices between goods. We must decide which good or goods should be pursued at the expense of others. We also consider how to mitigate the costs of choosing any particular good.

Suppose that we have a tree, and the tree is a thing of beauty. Should we keep the tree to enjoy its beauty? Should we turn the tree into building materials? Should we use the tree for fuel to heat our homes and cook our food? Each of these is a legitimate use of the tree, and a good choice depends upon our circumstances. If we have already built everything we want, and if our homes are already warm and our food is already cooked, then we might wish to conserve the tree. We can continue to enjoy it, and we may find it useful in the future. If we lack shelter, however, then using the tree for building becomes more important. If we have no fuel and a Minnesota winter is on its way, then turning the tree into firewood may be the best choice.

This is not a moral choice. It is a prudential choice, and still other factors may also enter in. Perhaps the tree is large enough that it blocks the growth of smaller vegetation. Perhaps its roots are clogging a watercourse. Maybe the tree already has some infestation that is slowly killing it. Prudence takes account of as many factors as possible.

For prudential reasons, humans may even choose to displace entire species. For example, the highly contagious variola virus used to kill three out of every ten people who contracted it. Those who survived were often scarred for life. Severe outbreaks of the virus could devastate entire human populations (at one time the mortality rate among Native Americans was higher than ninety percent). Beginning in the 1950s, people determined to drive the variola virus into extinction. This goal was accomplished by 1980, with some samples being preserved in laboratories for study. Variola was inconsistent with human flourishing, and humans chose to displace it. No one misses it.

We do not know what useful purpose the variola virus may have served in an unfallen world, but in a world changed by sin it brought great disorder and destruction. Right human ordering of the world led to the extinction

of this virus. Greater wholeness, order, and flourishing resulted from its destruction. The decision to destroy it was a good and prudent decision.

Exerting dominion within the natural world is not a zero-sum game, as if the world provided only so many resources. Rather, the created order is packed with untried and untapped resources. Often, we can take advantage of resources only by using up other resources in the process. For example, whales were hunted nearly to extinction for their oil, which was used for lubrication and light. As industrialization developed, mineral and vegetable oils replaced whale oils, and pressure on whales was reduced. Nevertheless, these later developments would not have been possible without the advances permitted by using whale oil.

Newer resources typically prove to be cleaner and more efficient than the old. We may not like the pollution that comes from internal combustion engines and we will surely develop other kinds of engines to replace them. But imagine the pollution we would have if all of us were still using horses and oxen for transportation and power.

Sometimes people must destroy before they can build. Sometimes the process of destruction is a necessary part of building. Sometimes one resource must be consumed in developing another and better resource. Sometimes humans may wish to displace a part of the created order. When faced with such choices, we should remember two things. First, the right use of nature is production, not preservation. Second, these decisions are matters of prudence, not morality.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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