

Stewardship revisited

A conceptual analysis

Prof.dr Jan van der Stoep

Inaugural lecture upon taking up the position of Special Professor of
Christian Philosophy
24 November 2022



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Esteemed Rector Magnificus, dear colleagues, students, family, and friends,

We live in uncertain times that are often referred to as the Anthropocene. Climate change and loss of biodiversity have irreversible effects. Never has human impact on the earth been so great. Disruptive forces are being unleashed that can hardly be controlled. What do these developments mean for the place we as humans occupy on this earth? Must we become humbler, accepting that we are a species among other species? Or is it time for us as humans to take full responsibility? Moreover, how are we supposed to feed the world population? Should we focus on small-scale agriculture that is nature-inclusive or should we instead work on more intensification to raise productivity?

In this inaugural lecture, I want to explore what the concept of stewardship means for current discussions on agriculture, nature conservation, and climate change. Stewardship is a term that often pops up in such discussions. Most of the time without further explication and in a rather fuzzy way. The use of the term is not without controversies. Sometimes stewardship is associated with anthropocentrism, albeit in a benign form. At other times, on the contrary, it is associated with care for the earth and for all living beings. To get a better understanding of what stewardship means, and to figure out what its actual relevance may be, I want to delve deeper into the history of the concept. Stewardship is not just a random term that we use today, for various purposes. It is part of a long tradition. In the eleventh century the English word steward was formed by combining two other words: *stig*, that means house, or dwelling place; and *weard* which is the ancient word for a warden (Hall 1990, 40). Taken literally, a steward is a person that manages an estate on behalf of a landlord. It is a profession that still exists today. The term stewardship, however, is also often used in a metaphorical sense, to describe the place of humans in the cosmos, and the specific vocation that humans have.

Stewardship is not only a term with a long history, but it also has strong religious connotations. The term is closely connected to a Christian worldview as it has been

developed in the Western world, especially in the tradition of the Reformation. Originally, stewardship means that people are commissioned by God to cultivate the land and to protect it. The central idea is that the earth does not belong to human beings themselves. People are called to cultivate the land in the service of God, or in more secular variants on behalf of their children or humanity at large. As an endowed professor of Christian philosophy, I see it as my task to investigate what meanings have been given to stewardship over time. Moreover, I want to explore whether we can interpret the concept in such a way that it is useful today. Hence the title of my speech: stewardship revisited. I hope to show that the concept of stewardship is much richer than often assumed. And I also want to demonstrate that, especially in our current age, we cannot do without the idea of stewardship.

I start my lecture with a definition of stewardship that I elaborate on during my talk. This definition reads as follows: stewardship is (1) the sustainable management of goods, (2) embedded in relationships of care, taking into account that (3) humans are dependent on the soil and on other living beings, while they are also (4) responsible for their actions.

Sustainable management

An initial connotation people often have with stewardship is that it has to do with sustainable management. This is also the notion with which our definition starts. Stewardship is first of all an economic concept, closely related to household activities. Economics as a term is even derived from *oikos*, the Greek word for house, family and/or estate. It is therefore not without reason that in the history of the church the term stewardship is often associated with accounting activities. Stewardship has to do with the management of money and goods, the properties of a church community (Hall 1990, 12-16). Particularly in recent decades, however, the term has taken on a broader meaning. Stewardship, as we use it today, does not only refer to economics, but also to ecology. Stewardship is about our common home, the world we live in, together with other living beings. It implies nature conservation and the management of ecosystems.

Reformers like John Wycliff, Martin Luther, and John Calvin already explicitly related stewardship to land use and the use of natural resources. At the same time, broader conceptions of stewardship often remained marginal, also in reformational thought (Hall 1990, 68). A leading and influential text in this context is Calvin's commentary on Genesis 2:15 in which he writes:

“Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.” (Calvin 2009, 77).

A couple of things stand out as we read this text. First, that for Calvin possession has an ambiguous meaning. Just because you legally own the land, this does not imply that you have an unrestricted claim to it. From a moral point of view, people have the land on loan. Sooner or later, they have to hand it over to others. No one can take their possessions with them into the grave. Second, it is noteworthy that Calvin’s interpretation of stewardship is very similar to the way we talk about sustainable development today. The message is: we must pass on this world to future generations in the same condition or even better. People may enjoy the annual fruits of the earth, but they may not exhaust, neglect, or pollute the land which brings forth these fruits.

In the quote of Calvin, just cited, the focus is mainly on future generations. However, stewardship may also involve animals and society at large. Worrell & Appleby, for example, talk about a “balanced account of the interests of society, future generations, and other species, as well as of private needs” (1999, 269). That indeed is a legitimate extension of the concept. If we assume that humans have the land on loan, and that the earth is our common home, then we also have obligations to humanity at large. The same applies to non-human beings. Calvin for example already stressed that animals are entitled to life and happiness. We should handle them gently (Thomas 1984, 154). Understood in this way, stewardship is far from a non-committal affair. It requires a circular agriculture in which input and output are in balance and in which farming is nature inclusive. It also requires an economy in which fair prices are being paid.

Often stewardship is understood in terms of maintenance: protecting natural resources, keeping the land in a good condition, and keeping balance between different interests. You also find this in Calvin. For him, the current situation is the starting point. However, it is questionable whether such an approach works in a time of rapid climate change and large-scale loss of biodiversity. Systemic change seems to be needed to prevent disasters. Therefore, it is noteworthy that there are also environmental scientists who speak about stewardship in a different way. They explicitly distance themselves from approaches that focus on maintenance or from what they call steady-state resource management

(Chaplin III et al. 2009). Stewardship, according to them, implies human intervention and transformation of ecosystems. Instead of looking for conservation and preservation, these environmentalists embrace uncertainty. They hold that innovation is needed to counter the disruptive forces of climate change and biodiversity loss.

To gain more insight into what sustainable management actually means, a discussion between Bob Goudzwaard and Bas Kee, two thinkers from the tradition of reformational philosophy, may be relevant. Bob Goudzwaard, following Aristoteles, makes a sharp contrast between two Greek terms: *oikonomia* and *chrematistike*. According to Goudzwaard, *oikonomia* is about the maintenance of goods or the maintenance of an estate, *chrematistike* about self-enrichment through trade (Goudzwaard 1979, 211-212). Bas Kee, on the contrary, argues that such an approach easily leads to a negative view on exchange (1996, 282-284). Emphasis is put on preserving the current situation and not on entrepreneurship. That, according to him, does not do justice to how the economy is supposed to work. I think Kee has an important point here. Economics is not only about maintaining the status quo, but also about responding to change. Cultural development is always an interplay of continuity and discontinuity, of sedimentation and innovation. In a world constantly in flux, mere preservation and conservation cannot suffice. One should build new landscapes, develop new agricultural practices, and create new socio-ecological interrelationships. At the same time, however, one must also minimize the risk that human intervention will only make things worse (Keulartz 2012).

Relationships of care

Stewardship would have a rather truncated meaning if it only had to do with sustainable management of goods. In management terms the world is viewed merely as a set of resources, environmental services, or life-support systems. Things that you have at your disposal to use in an instrumentalist way. Such a managerial point of view places human beings at the centre of the universe. It does not take into account that humans are creatures among other creatures. That brings us to the second part of our definition of stewardship. Humans are servants of creation, not masters. As leaseholders, they have the duties of ownership but not the rights (Scruton 2012, 217-218). The management of goods, therefore, always has to be embedded in relationships of care with other living beings.

It may not be immediately clear to everyone that stewardship is also about serving nature. Western Christianity is often associated with human domination (e.g., White 1967). This is not entirely without reason. In the Western world human exceptionalism has become very influential. There have always been opposing voices in history, however (Passmore 1980,

40). Stewardship thinking is one of them. Overall, two schools of thought can be distinguished in Western Christianity (Paterson 2003). On the one hand, there is a school of thought in which human domination is central. A crucial reference in this regard is Genesis 1:28 where it is said of humans that they must subdue (*kabash*) the earth and rule over it (*radah*). One cannot ignore the rather harsh meaning of the original Hebrew words used in this text, words that in other contexts are applied to kings. Especially among the Puritans who went to the New World, the domination view was rather popular (Harrison 2005). A second school of thought, less influential, is the stewardship approach. In this approach the emphasis is on earth keeping. Humans must care for the soil, for animals and plants, because they are created by God and therefore worthwhile. Often references are made to the Garden of Eden. Especially Genesis 2:15 gets emphasis in this approach, where it is said that humans must till and serve the earth (*abad*) and keep a watchful eye on it (*shamar*).

According to a stewardship approach, humans are an integral part of creation. They live within creation, not above it. Such a view corresponds to the cosmology of the Old Testament, which is best referred to as theocentric. According to the Old Testament, it is not man that is at the center, or nature, but God (Boersema 1997, 209). All living beings praise God, each in their own way. They do not need humans for that. In line with this, the Old Testament also explicitly distinguishes between wild and domesticated nature (Boersema 1997, 234-235). Human civilization is surrounded by wilderness, a wilderness that can be threatening. The task to cultivate the earth, and to take care of it, relates primarily to domesticated nature. People have a duty to treat domesticated animals as best as they can. In the Old Testament farm animals were even seen as part of the household. The relationship with wild animals was different, however. There was no special duty to care for them. Rather, a policy of non-interference is appropriate. Just as in ancient times, now we are experiencing the threat of non-human nature and with even more urgency. As a result of overexploitation, we are faced with an earth that is rebelling, turning against us humans (Hamilton 2017; Latour 2017). It is therefore important to emphasize that stewardship places limits on human civilization. Stewardship cannot do without reducing human impact (Thompson 2017, 108-112).

Humans may be an integral part of nature, at the same time they are also equipped with the ability to make evaluative judgements. They can assign value to things independently of the immediate utility these things have for themselves (Attfield 2014, 14-15). That creates obligations. It gives humans the duty to take good care of other living beings and to balance the interests of animals, plants, and people and act accordingly. Plants, animals, and even rivers and mountains have more than just instrumental value, they also have an intrinsic worth. They have an inner nature that must be respected (Attfield 2006, 191-195).

Religiously speaking, all things that are created are significant because God has an intimate relationship with them (Pope Francis, 2016, 182). Animals, plants, and ecosystems are willed by God and refer to a transcendent origin. This alone already makes them worthwhile and eligible for protection.

Let's focus for this moment on the issue of animals. Although it is always humans who make laws and political decisions, that does not mean that these laws cannot also be for and about animals, so that they can flourish as best they can and according to their own nature (Nussbaum 2006, 350). People cannot, of course, escape their own human interpretations of what is good flourishing of animals, but this does not mean they cannot empathize as best they can with what animals need and what behaviour suits them (Nussbaum 2006, 354-355). As animals cannot advocate for themselves, we humans will have to represent their interests as best we can.

Not everyone, however, is pleased with such a picture of human beings as caretakers. Donaldson and Kymlicka, for example, point out that wardship or stewardship are notions in which the agency of animals is easily denied (2011, 102). This is indeed a real danger, a danger that also arises in the interaction among humans themselves. Relationships of care can easily take on paternalistic traits. It is therefore important to emphasize that real care affirms others in their agency (Heidegger 1962, 158-159). It does not start with caring 'for' other beings but with caring 'about' them. Things we care about, things we love, are never fully in our control (Frankfurt 1998, 80-94). Projects can fail and people can fail us. As a result, we also lose something of ourselves. The same is true for animals, trees, or plants that are dear to us. Caring about other beings implies a long-term commitment. We cannot just love something for a moment and then love something else instead. What good care is all about in the first place is that we do justice to the people, animals, and plants entrusted to us, that we let them flourish in a way that suits them. Animals, plants, and humans are not just instruments for our own life projects, but beings we relate to, beings we care about.

Dependent beings

A third element in the definition of stewardship that I presented is that humans are dependent beings, dependent on the soil, dependent on other forms of life. In thinking about stewardship, the relationship between man and earth often takes centre stage. This idea has ancient roots and can already be found in Genesis 2:7 where it is said that man, *adam*, is made from the fertile soil of the field, *adama*. A similar semantic play can be found in the English word 'human' that is related to words like 'humus' and 'humility'. Soil life and the life in our guts are intimately connected. The story of the building of the Tower of

Babel, further on in the book of Genesis, can be read as a criticism of a culture that elevates itself and detaches itself from the soil (Davis 2009, 36-39). Soil conservation is a matter of agrarian prudence. If humans take good care of the earth, the earth will also take good care of them (Thompson 2017, 94-98).

The interconnectedness between humans and the earth is gaining renewed urgency today. We are becoming increasingly aware that as humans we are part of a complex web of relations. Humans live in close symbiosis with companion species (Haraway 2016). The coexistence between species is, however, not always a peaceful affair. Organisms need to eat other organisms in order to live. At the same time, they are eaten themselves. That is how the circle of life works. Animal sacrifices, as happened in many cultures, may be repulsive to us modern humans, but you can also understand such sacrifices as a way in which ancient cultures dealt with feelings of dependency and debt (Wirzba 2011, 355-358). People must come to terms with the fact that their lives depend on other beings, be it plants or animals.

Awareness of human dependency flourishes in a sphere of contemplation. It is remarkable that the creation story of Genesis 1 does not culminate in the creation of man, but in the sabbath, a day on which no work is done and life itself is celebrated. The first chapter of Genesis is a profoundly liturgical text. Nowadays, in ecotheology, it is often emphasized that humans are priests of creation. That is not without reason. Praying, fasting, and thanksgiving are important elements in Christian liturgy. Through such liturgical practices, our engagement with the world can be deepened. People may develop a sense of gratitude, a sense of the givenness of things (Zizioulas 2006, 286-290). Thanksgiving, which is celebrated on this very day in the United States, stands in the same tradition, although it also has a strong colonialist background. Instead of contrasting stewardship and priesthood, it is better to leave them side by side. Stewardship appeals to people's responsibility, urges them to become active. Priesthood, on the contrary, brings people to a standstill, makes them aware of the gift of life.

Having dinner together, celebrating it as a meaningful event, may also be a way to experience the givenness of being. Albert Borgmann defends the importance of eating practices (2003, 117-128). He shows how the use of microwaves and ready-made meals has put pressure on the culture of the table. Food becomes more and more a commodity. This process is exacerbated because supermarkets have increasingly disconnected consumption from production. People no longer know where their food is coming from (Sanford 2014, 977-978). Fortunately, there are also counterforces: the slow-food movement, a renewed focus on cooking in books and on television, more attention in supermarkets to the origin

of products. A good meal must be consumed together in an atmosphere of friendship. It must also be served in a generous manner. Eating your meal with joy and sharing it with others are important values (Kass 2003, 174 ff). This way, you cultivate an atmosphere of gratitude, an attitude in which you joyfully consume the fruits of the land.

That man and earth belong together, and humans, plants, and animals are mutually dependent should remind us that agricultural practices are complex systems in which many different actors play a role. A steward, rightly understood, is not an autonomous agent, driven by economic incentives, but someone who is entrusted to care for others, as well as for the common good (Davis, Schoorman & Donaldson 1997). Such an approach fits well with the development of local food movements, movements in which new relationships are established between people and the earth and among people. Of course, local food movements are not a panacea for everything. That would be too easy. People often hold that what you get locally is more sustainable, healthier, or more equitable, but these claims are difficult to prove (Thompson 2015, 192). In addition, one cannot ignore the international nature of our global food system. Intensive forms of agriculture may be needed to save land while at the same time feeding enough people on earth. Despite these reservations, the development of local food movements is inspiring. It gives us the opportunity to focus attention on the functional integrity of farming systems and the strength of local economies (Thompson 2015, 190).

A healthy agriculture, according to stewardship principles, requires us to rediscover and appreciate ecological and social dependencies. It is precisely at this point that the added value of local food movements becomes apparent. An interesting example is regenerative agriculture, in which managing soil quality and restoring biodiversity are paramount. The earth needs time to recover. The sabbath commandment, that I already referred to, not only meant rest for humans, but for all of creation (Davis 2009, 90-94). During sabbatical and jubilee years, the land had to remain unused, and a redistribution of land had to take place. Rest had to be given to livestock as well. Another interesting example is community supported agriculture, cooperatives in which farmers, citizens and other parties work together. When citizens co-own land, own a stake in a farm, or regularly visit a farmyard, this creates all kinds of new relationships, between citizens and farmers, and between citizens and their environment. Let us also not forget food poverty. In a world where social inequality is on the rise, it is more important than ever that we are willing to share food with others, through food banks or in some other way.

Responsibility

So far, we have discussed three elements of stewardship. Stewardship should first be understood as sustainable management of goods. Second, stewardship must also be embedded in relationships of care. And third, stewardship must take into account that people depend on the soil, on other living beings, and on each other. We now come to the fourth and final element of our definition: stewardship cannot exist without a sense of responsibility. It is therefore not without reason that we have already spoken about responsibility a few times. A steward manages goods on behalf of a landlord. This implies that a steward is held accountable. In religious terms God is the landlord, or Jesus when he returns. In secular forms, as mentioned earlier, future generations can be thought of, or humanity at large. One may also think of being accountable to one's own conscience.

The emphasis on responsibility in stewardship thinking can easily suggest that humans are superior to other beings. All emphasis then comes to be placed on the uniqueness of humans compared to animals. This is often followed by a search for characteristics from which that human uniqueness will then emerge: rationality, language, a moral sense. Such a quest is relevant, but also quite complex. Moreover, if one only focuses on human exceptionalism, one easily misses sight of the most important motive behind stewardship, namely that humans are called to serve creation. The stewardship approach in this regard is quite close to the way Martin Heidegger speaks about the place of humans in the world. According to Heidegger man is the shepherd of Being (2008, 245). Humans are embedded in the world and cannot help but give meaning to existence and to engage with the things around them. That indeed gives them a specific role, but it does not place them above nature. In a certain way such a view is still anthropocentric. Not in the sense that human beings are the centre of the universe, but more in the sense that they have a specific vocation. It is not a teleological anthropocentrism, in which humans are the purpose of life, but a normative anthropocentrism, an anthropocentrism focusing on the duties people have (Attfield 2014, 30-33).

Notions like responsibility and accountability give stewardship thinking a firm urgency. People are addressed as persons. The central issue is not 'what' humans are, but 'who' they are (Ricoeur 1990, 21-23). Are they trustworthy? Can you count on them? The idea is that humans are called, that a moral appeal is made to them. Especially at a time of climate change and loss of biodiversity, when alarm bells are ringing everywhere, this may feel as an unbearable burden. Are humans really capable of saving the earth? Is the responsibility that comes along with such a task not far too great? On the one hand, there is a temptation to resort to drastic measures or firm interventions. On the other hand, such a situation can also paralyze people. From a stewardship perspective, however, hope is a more

appropriate reaction. Hope means that you stop wanting to control everything without also giving up the expectation of a better world. Just as people are not above nature, neither are they above time. Their existence is a situated existence. A good steward focuses on what he or she wants to leave behind. That in itself is already an act of hope, an act of trust that somehow there will be a future (Krznaric 2020, 15-16). We have no guarantee of a happy ending. That does not, however, relieve us from the duty to care about the things entrusted to us.

The connection with responsibility and hope, makes stewardship a very relevant concept for today. It appeals to people without demanding of them what is beyond their capacity. First and foremost, stewardship is our calling to leave the world a better place. Instead of passing on costs to the environment, to people elsewhere in the world, or to future generations, we will have to factor these costs into our current ways of doing things. We can no longer shift the burden of our way of living onto others. Stewardship cannot exist without self-restraint. Doing justice to people, doing justice to the earth, is an absolute prerequisite for a good life, a life of caring relationships with other organisms. Second, stewardship urges us to create places of hope, places where humans, animals, and plants can flourish, together, each in their own way. Think of those regenerative forms of agriculture or those new cooperatives between farmers and citizens that I already mentioned earlier. A return of the commons as they used to be, but then in a more nature-inclusive way. Or think of festive meals and the development of new food cultures in which the fullness of life can be celebrated. Such places of hope can function as examples, best practices in which new experiences are gained. By stimulating our imagination, imagining a world as it should be, we can make new beginnings, however small. New beginnings on which future generations can build further.

A word of thanks

At the end of this inaugural lecture, I would like to express my gratitude. One aspect of stewardship is that it has to do with heritage, with the transfer of goods from one generation to the next. Not least, it is also about the transfer of cultural capital, capital that you acquire through upbringing and education and that you may pass on to new generations. I will keep this word of thanks short, however. On May 20 this year, I delivered my inaugural lecture at the Theological University Kampen | Utrecht. I already mentioned many people then. Words of thanks lose weight if they are uttered several times. Therefore, this afternoon I limit myself to the Wageningen context.

I thank the Board of the Association for Reformational Philosophy and the Executive Board of Wageningen University & Research for the trust they have placed in me. Gert van Dijk, Han Zuilhof, and Marcel Verweij, I am grateful for your support and your wisdom as members of my curatorium. I thank the colleagues of the Philosophy Chair Group for the warm welcome in their midst. Marcel, Leon, Cor, Bernice, Josette, Beatrijs, and Zoe, I mention in particular. But with them I also include the other colleagues.

Korien van Vuuren, Joris Glas, Leon Pijnenburg, Yacouba Coulibaly, and Daniel Pungu, thanks for coming to me to do a PhD track in connection with my Wageningen chair. Some of you are just starting, others are already further along. Dear bachelor and master students, I enjoy our discussions on food ethics, intercultural philosophy, and the moral status of animals. With several organisations I maintain close contact. Rina Molenaar, Wim Blok, René van de Kieft, Ruben Bringsken, Jan Groen, Koert Jansen, Antonie Treuren, and Maarten van Nieuw Amerongen: thank you for your commitment to the chair and for the conversations we have had.

I would like to extend a special word of thanks to my two predecessors of this chair. First, Egbert Schuurman, with whom I frequently attended lectures during my studies in Wageningen and who also introduced me to Christian philosophy. Egbert, while writing this lecture, I realized how much I have learnt from you, about the role of technology, about the relationship between man and nature, about hope. I also would like to thank Henk Jochemsen, my other predecessor of this chair. Although I did not study with you, Henk, I have learnt a lot from you, as well. Since 1996, we have often worked closely together, first in the Institute for Cultural Ethics, and then in many other places. To have an older colleague to learn the trade from is extremely valuable. It is a great honour to be your successor.

The greatest gift that I received in Wageningen was you, Petra. A lot has changed since that time we lived together as students at Duivendaal, in the wooden houses, between the

chickens. We have been able to experience many beautiful things together, and we also have been able to support each other when times were more difficult. Matthijs and Daphne, Ilse, Daan and Milou, representatives of the new generation, I am glad you are here today. All of you, each in your own way, care about creation. It is because of people like you that I look to the future with confidence.

Ik heb gezegd.

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'Stewardship is not only a term with a long history, but it also has strong religious connotations. The term is closely connected to a Christian worldview as it has been developed in the Western world, especially in the tradition of the Reformation. Originally, stewardship means that people are commissioned by God to cultivate the land and to protect it. The central idea is that the earth does not belong to human beings themselves. People are called to cultivate the land in the service of God, or in more secular variants on behalf of their children or humanity at large. As an endowed professor of Christian philosophy, I see it as my task to investigate what meanings have been given to stewardship over time. Moreover, I want to explore whether we can interpret the concept in such a way that it is useful today. Hence the title of my speech: stewardship revisited. I hope to show that the concept of stewardship is much richer than often assumed. And I also want to demonstrate that, especially in our current age, we cannot do without the idea of stewardship.'