

2015

Scarcity vs. Abundance: Moving Beyond Dualism to “Enough”

Cherice Bock

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>

 Part of the Religion Commons

Scarcity vs. Abundance: Moving Beyond Dualism to “Enough”

By Cherice Bock



In American culture, we are often caught between a fear of scarcity and an awareness of overwhelming abundance. I don't know about you, but I often feel bombarded by messages encouraging me to get more, be more, have more, do more. Even as an American of modest means, I have abundant access to food and other resources. There is even an abundance of exercise equipment and regimens to help us burn off the abundance of calories we eat — and an abundance of how-to books on simplifying our lives after all the stuff we buy. Abundance seems to be everywhere.

At the same time, we often feel as though we're running from a haunting fear of scarcity. I'll own this one, and not just place it on our culture: it sometimes feels as though *I* am running from the fear of scarcity. I have a tendency to fear I won't have enough to support my family, that I won't *be* enough if I don't pursue this or that professional opportunity, that I don't have enough time or energy, that I'm not a good enough mom or spouse or friend. Perhaps you can relate.

When do we get to sit back and enjoy knowing we have enough, we *are* enough?

Jesus, of course, had a few things to say on this matter, such as: "Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet our God in heaven feeds them. Aren't you more important than they? . . . Stop worrying, then, over questions such as 'What are we to eat,' or 'what are we to drink,' or 'what are we to wear?'. . . God knows everything you need. Seek first God's reign, and God's justice, and all these things will be given you besides" (Matthew 6:26, 31-33, The Inclusive Version). This is easier said than done, but at least we can take solace in the recognition that people were already struggling with this problem in Jesus's time.

I see this dichotomy as one of the driving forces (or perhaps the main driving force) behind the dualism present in Western society as is so often discussed by feminist scholars. Within this winner-loser binary, in which it seems someone must be destroyed in order for the other to advance, there's an underlying fear that if I don't take what I need, possibly at your expense, I may not survive. So I must take my piece of the pie — and maybe yours, too — to be sure I'll have enough for tomorrow. This creates a situation where I strive for abundance so I don't have to be afraid of scarcity. It's a rational fear, since others feel the same way and are grabbing for their pieces of the pie, too. But this

puts us in a situation where we never know how much is enough, so we live in a constant state of fearing scarcity, all the while stockpiling (or "storing away in barns," as Jesus put it) to create an abundance.

Author and speaker Brené Brown emphasizes that scarcity and abundance are actually two sides of the same coin. They are not opposites. She says that the opposite of scarcity is, in fact, "enough."^[1] Scarcity and abundance work together as a positive feedback loop, driving one another in an ever-increasing frenzy for "more," creating an ever-widening gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" as some gather an abundance and others are left with scarcity. The Bible's wisdom literature presents us with a similar point, seeing danger in both scarcity and abundance and thus praying, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need" (see Proverbs 30:7-9, NRSV).

When we are at peace with enough, on the other hand, we don't have to be afraid of not-enough; we don't have to hoard more than enough. When we experience "enough," we can rest, trust, relax, share, and live into an awareness of our true needs. We can seek and embody God's Kingdom fully, free from worry and fear. This is what the church looks like in Acts, as the earliest Christ-followers live communally, share meals, and sell everything, pool their resources, and care for those marginalized by society.

Living in such a way requires a level of trust in God and one's community that feels vulnerable, utterly terrifying; and yet, not living in this way is equally anxiety-producing, as we must fear for our very survival.

This dichotomy between fears of scarcity and yearnings for abundance is clearly not part of what we are called to as followers of Jesus, and I am increasingly convinced that it detrimentally impacts us psychologically, relationally, and ecologically. In all three of these spheres of society, our dualistic anxiety around scarcity and abundance is reaping unhealthy harvests.

It is to these three spheres that I turn next, discussing the impact on relationships through the lens of liberation pedagogy, postmodern philosophy, and feminist critique, moving to the impact of our drive for abundance on the rest of the natural world, and analyzing the psychology of the Western worldview regarding shame, scarcity, abundance, and enough. I will conclude by sharing a way forward, one that leans heavily on Christ's call to the church to embody his essence, and the interconnectivity in the recognition of other-as-differentiated-same in feminist thought.

The Psychological Impact of Enough and Not-Enough



If you don't know of Brené Brown, whom I quoted earlier, drop what you're doing (after you finish this article, of course!) and find her book *Daring Greatly*. In it, she talks about the culture of scarcity in which we live, and points to three main tendencies we collectively practice due to our fear of not-enough: we feel ashamed, we compare ourselves to others, and we disengage from true relationships.

Brown states, "The greatest casualties of a scarcity culture are our willingness to own our vulnerabilities and our ability to engage with the world from a place of worthiness."^[2] We hide from one another, showing only tiny slivers of ourselves — whichever parts we can make look perfect. This is unfortunately true even (especially?) for those of us in the church. Perhaps we are trying to prove our worthiness of Christ's love, to prove to ourselves and others that we are in fact saved, that in the scarcity of the straight and narrow road that only a few find, we have found it, and we are the chosen, the worthy.

This fear of not being enough, of not being worthy of God's grace, feeds into the Western cultural phenomena of destroying an "other" so that the "self" can advance (more about this in the next section). We have a tendency to scapegoat, to tell ourselves, "At least I'm better than THOSE people." Thus, we belittle, shame, and exclude others so that our own worthiness seems assured.

And yet, I don't know about you, but when I act from this kind of mentality, I feel incredibly insecure and fearful. I know that at any moment, my mask of perfection could be snatched off by another seeking to advance himself or herself, my imperfections would be laid bare, my unworthiness of grace exposed. When living from this mindset, I must keep up my guard and hold others at arm's length so they can't get close enough to see the weaknesses in my armor. Although this form of living attempts to overcome vulnerability by creating an impenetrable stronghold, a façade of perfection, it actually creates a situation where we always feel vulnerable, where we feel a scarcity of love and worthiness, where we can never know others or be known by them.

This dualistic understanding of the self — the one I present to the world and the one I know myself to be — causes major psychic dissonance, which can lead to depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and despair. It's the opposite of what "church" should be about. Yet, I wonder how many of us feel this way on a Sunday morning, as we put on a happy face and attempt to prove we are lovable? I wonder how many of our churches inadvertently fan these flames by not creating safe spaces for open

discussions about our fears and needs, by creating a hierarchy between those deemed “charitable” and those designated as the “needy”?

I recently attended an excellent gathering in my own congregation where we discussed our understanding of “outreach.” Did we have a passion for sharing God’s love, in addition to reaching out to help meet the physical needs of those in our community and world? One person queried what an ideal world would look like. Would it be a world where no one needed anything? I realized that no, an ideal world would be one where everyone’s needs are known, where I could share my needs, receive what I need from others, and share what I had that would meet others’ needs. In this ideal world — this Kingdom of God, if you will — our places of greatest vulnerability would be known and valued, and they would become sources of strength and communal resilience as we’d realize that *together* we do, in fact, have enough.

Relationships Based on “Enough”

What we know today as “Western” culture comes to us from a long history of battles, a history told by the victors. The historical markers are wars and changes in leadership, where one monarch dies or is overthrown and another replaces (usually) him. It is the culture of empire, a power structure that requires two classes: a winner and a loser, an oppressed and an oppressor, a master and a slave.^[3] Both parties are necessary in this system, so that, try as we might, within a culture of empire, we cannot bring everyone up to an equal level. There must be a hierarchy, a ladder to climb, a class of people lower than my own so that I fight for every scrap of power available at my own level, thereby keeping others in their own strata and making sure I am not reduced to an even more powerless level on the hierarchy. This is why poor whites struggled to keep slavery or segregation in place, and why white women might fight to keep gender roles and “traditional values” in place so they can hold onto their modicum of power within the household and over minorities or gender “deviants.” All these power struggles are based on perceived scarcity: we grasp for the power available to us by destroying those below us. But this locks us into a cycle where we must always fear one another. Those who are not at the lowest rung on the ladder must always fear the rebellion of those below, showing no weakness, perhaps extending charity, securing our position as part of the “haves” at some level, but not contributing to a solution to systemic problems.^[4]

Shifting the Relational Paradigm



What might a shift in this relational paradigm look like? Paulo Freire gives us the term *conscientização* (“conscientization”), whereby our true humanity is unlocked as we become aware of — or “conscientized” to — our own role as oppressor, are released from that role by those we oppressed, and freed from dehumanizing fear as we begin to see and value another, not only for what we can take from him or her, but as a dialogue partner with whom we can cooperate.^[5] This dialogue partner is known and empathized with, as in Emmanuel Levinas’s “other.” In this “other,” we come face to

face with God, with the infinite, transcendent, wholly Other whom we can never fully understand, and yet who is intimately present and placing a burden of responsibility on us to care for his or her needs. [6] Through loving this "other," we love God; and we may even learn to love ourselves, as in Jesus's greatest commands — and his explanation regarding who counts as our neighbor (Mt 22:36, Lk 10:27ff).

A Feminist Approach

Feminist authors provide an even deeper understanding of Levinas's "other," acknowledging that as women in Western culture, we have been treated as "other," and therefore, in a way, the "other" is the "self." [7] As such, we can empathize more intimately with those considered the "other" through experiencing our own marginalization. Rather than Levinas's asymmetrical responsibility for an ultimately unknowable and abstract "other," in feminist thought (similarly to Freire) we encounter *actual others*, with actual faces, who are deeply and intimately known through shared experience of marginalization: the other who is part of the same, and yet not overtaken by it or made same without distinction.

Luce Irigaray explains this by using a woman's sexual experience as a metaphor: she has been made "other" in her body's deviation from the masculine "norm": she is the "sex which is *not* one." [8] As well, in her ability to experience multiple locations of pleasure — as well as her experience of the "other" literally inside her "same" — she is the "sex which is *not one*." She is self, same, and other concurrently. And the others she knows are not replaceable and abstract, but personal, physical, intimately known, invited, infinitely mysterious and different, celebrated for those differences, and present in solidarity with the self. [9]

Carol Gilligan calls this a morality of care, where ethical relationships recognize the particular needs of another, rather than a generalizable need of a class of people. [10] Within the morality of care, making one's needs known becomes safe and fulfilling. A relationship of reciprocity develops, rather than the banking relationship of the culture of empire. Within this relationship of care, there is enough to sate our psyches: there is enough empathy (same), there is enough differentiation (other), and both are valued.

Living within Boundaries: Receiving Enough from the Earth



In our present time — and likely in all times, though we are perhaps only becoming culturally conscious of it now — the topic of scarcity, abundance, and enough is not covered fully without including a discussion of the ways we interact with the Earth. I am suspicious that our current ecological crisis is based largely on the impact of the Western culture of empire on our psycho-social wellbeing. It is a culture of limitless boundaries, of constant need to expand one's control and power, one's territory, into the space of another, because if one is not controlling an "other," one is relegated to the position of "other." To be reduced to this position of powerlessness, controlled by others, means one is in danger of being utterly destroyed.

This culture of empire seeks limitless abundance, at first through conquest and colonization of new lands and peoples, and now through increasing efficiency and control of market share. [11] This cultural impetus is belied in our growth economy, our economy that must always be expanding or else it will collapse. What our balance sheets don't take into account are the very real ecological limitations of our planet, and the fact that it is extremely unlikely that we can simply start over on a new planet (or an infinite number of new planets as we take over and destroy each one). [12] Yes, we can improve the efficiency with which we use our resources, but how many Prius owners do you know

who simply drive twice as many miles because their car's gas mileage is twice as good? Unless we set boundaries for the amount of resources we will use alongside our efficiency gains, our current economic growth pattern is not sustainable. As the oft-quoted Osage proverb reminds, someday we will have to come to terms with the fact that we cannot eat or breathe money.

Treating the Natural World as "Other"

Similarly to the replaceability of "others" in an infinitely unknowable sea of "not self" within the destructive, dualistic culture of empire I have been discussing, we have relegated the rest of the natural world to the position of "other." In this way of thinking, we as humanity must gain complete control, lest we be the losers in the "man vs. nature" duality we set up. We tend to think of natural capital as infinitely replaceable by a different resource, failing to recognize the value of ecosystem services destroyed when we move natural capital into the flow of goods and services on which our economy relies.^[13]

We do not limit our consumption to the rate at which such goods can be renewed, partially because in our social system we do not have a good mechanism for ensuring that everyone gets enough. Since we validly fear our inability to acquire enough, we fear scarcity, and each of us tries to acquire an abundance so that we will have enough for the foreseeable future. This is often termed the "tragedy of the commons": we capitalize on resources for personal gain, because we know that if we do not, someone else will gain from it, and the resource will no longer be available.^[14]

The rest of the natural world has suffered the same fate as women within this culture of empire, as ecofeminists point out. The perceived winners in this dualistic system are God, good, man, spirit, reason, and order, among others. On the other hand, evil, women, emotion, matter and the natural world, and chaos are to be reduced and (if possible) destroyed.^[15] The problem with this strategy, of course, is that man cannot live without woman; a spirit cannot survive disembodied (except, in some form, through death); and the human race will not continue without a natural world to cultivate and rely upon. Human lust for power and control masks a truly saddening fear of insecurity and vulnerability. Our desire for independence and self-reliance hides a self-hatred so powerful that we do not see our own destruction in the destruction of the "other."^[16]

Our fear of the chaos of nature drives us to seek more and more of the "same": we grow our food in single, standardized, cloned crops, increasing our efficiency, without noticing that it also increases our vulnerability. One pest and our livelihood is wiped out. Without the redundancy of biodiversity, our economic stability, not to mention our ability to eat, could easily be threatened. By making nature "other," which we must "subdue" and over which we must gain "dominion," we have exposed our own psychic fear of not having enough, of not being enough, of needing to push another down so that we may rise up.

When Humans Are Treated as Part of the Subdued Natural World

Living into this fear of scarcity and unworthiness, as a culture we have come to the point where we are available to our places of employment around the clock. We are pushing together for more growth, more power, more control, more efficiency, so that we can use more, get more, be more. Because of our own brokenness, our own inability to see ourselves as worthy, we do not allow ourselves to rest, because another may gain an advantage. We do not see beyond a short time frame, squeezing every last drop of productivity out of the land, the sea, and people themselves, paying little or no attention to whether this lifestyle is sustainable for a long period of time.

Ellen Davis re-envision the way we translate the words "dominion" and "subdue" in Genesis to instead refer to a practice of skilled mastery. To "have dominion" and "subdue the earth" does not

mean “to lord it over,” but to master the skill of ensuring that everyone and everything in the created order has enough.^[18] We enter Walter Brueggemann’s “prophetic imagination,”^[19] living in the space between what is and what we can envision it to be, and working toward the continued fruitful, chaotic fertility that epitomizes the biodiverse planet under our care.^[20]

Conclusion

Davis, along with Sallie McFague and Mary Daly, invites us to remember: to recognize our membership in the Body of Christ, including the created world in which we were placed.^[21] Through our understanding of connectivity with the natural world around us, we see ourselves as a differentiated “other,” and yet part of the “same.” We are not interchangeable parts, cogs in a production line, but irreplaceable individuals, tasked with mastering the skill of ensuring that all have enough.



The Body of Christ is a helpful metaphor for this paradigm of connectivity. A body is a miniature ecosystem: all the parts work together and are part of the “same,” but the work of the body could not be done without differentiation, diversity. The doctrine of the Trinity provides another helpful metaphor for how we can live inter-connectedly with one another and the natural world: the relational Trinity is composed of fully whole “others” — Creator, Redeemer, and Holy Spirit — who are simultaneously wholly “same.” These metaphors and the example of the early church give us a window into an alternative worldview to that of empire and domination, although even this story has been co-opted and twisted to support the culture of empire in many ways.

At this point in history, due to our current ecological crisis and the injustices experienced by so many who are relegated to the category of “have-nots,” it is more important than ever to live into our calling as a church to be the Body of Christ. This requires that we trust one another, admit our own needs, and open ourselves to vulnerability and unknowing. In so doing, we also open ourselves to much greater expressions of care for one another, reducing the anxiety to be perfect all the time. We can move toward being fully known, and live into our own inexplicable loveliness. When we rely on the God who clothes the lilies of the field, we gladly share both our needs and our resources, and don’t have to grab for what we need. We can trust we will be satisfied, will be enough, and the Earth will have enough.

Endnotes

[1] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), 24-30. ([back to text](#))

[2] Brown, 2012, 29. ([back to text](#))

[3] Helene Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” in *The Newly Born Woman*, Helene Cixous & Catherine Clement (Minneapolis, MN: University of Montana Press, 1988), 64. ([back to text](#))

[4] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, transl. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970, 1993, 2000), 27. ([back to text](#))

[5] Freire, 2000, 67. ([back to text](#))

- [6] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, transl. Barbara Harshav and Michael B. Smith (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 110. ([back to text](#))
- [7] For example: Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 25; Mary F. Belenky, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1997), 7; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2002), 27; Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, transl. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23-31; Cixous, 1988, 80-85. ([back to text](#))
- [8] Irigaray, 1985, 23-31. ([back to text](#))
- [9] Margaret Urban Walker, qtd. in Solberg, 1997, 53. ([back to text](#))
- [10] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological theory and women's development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). ([back to text](#))
- [11] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1983, 2003), 159-170. ([back to text](#))
- [12] Thomas Prugh, *Natural Capital and Human Economic Survival*, Second Edition (Boca Raton, London, New York, Washington, D.C.: Lewis Publishers and International Society for Ecological Economics, 1999), 49-65. ([back to text](#))
- [13] Ecosystem services would be things like a forest's ability to provide food, constant temperatures, clean water, consistent rain, and habitat for other creatures ([back to text](#))
- [14] E.g., Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, 162 no. 3859 (Dec. 13, 1968): 1243-1248. ([back to text](#))
- [15] Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2005), 38-40; Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth* (Hampshire, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 24. ([back to text](#))
- [16] For more on this topic of human (especially masculine) self-hatred inherent in the cultural dichotomy "man vs. nature," see William Cronon's excellent essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," especially pp. 346-348 (though, as an environmental historian, his exegesis of the creation stories leaves something to be desired); William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Global Environmental History: An Introductory Reader*, ed. J.R. McNeill and Alan Roe (London & New York: Routledge, a Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 339-363. ([back to text](#))
- [17] Walter Brueggemann's book, *Sabbath as Resistance*, gives an excellent explication of this problem, going into detail regarding the ways participating in Sabbath allows us to resist the culture of "now" and "more." See Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). ([back to text](#))
- [18] Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42-65. ([back to text](#))
- [19] Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001). ([back to text](#))

[20] Davis, 2009, 9, 17. ([back to text](#))

[21] Davis, 2009, 16; Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973). ([back to text](#))

© 2015 by Cherice Bock and Christian Feminism Today

Cherice Bock

<https://chericebock.com/>

Cherice Bock teaches at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, where her areas of research and specialization include nonviolent theology, ecological theology, Quaker studies, pneumatology, feminist theology, and liberation theology. She holds an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary and is currently working on a PhD in environmental studies at Antioch University New England. In addition, Cherice serves as the editor of *Whole Terrain* (an environmental studies journal), coordinates a community garden at George Fox University, and edits *Peace Month* for her denomination. You can find Cherice tending her own little patch of land, hiking and camping in her home state of Oregon, biking around town with her spouse and two sons, and enjoying home-grown fruits, veggies, and eggs. Her doctoral work will focus on the garden as metaphor and physical space for encountering God, others, and creation in order to nourish resilient communities.