

A Moral and Ethical Framework for Opposing the Pipeline in Burlington County, New Jersey

It is almost difficult to believe that we are only 150 years removed from living in a nation where opposition to the African Slave Trade was a controversial opinion. We have advanced in our understanding about how human beings ought to treat one another to the extent that we can now say unequivocally that the slave trade of the 19th Century was morally and ethically wrong.

Slaves at that time were not treated with the same set of standards as non-slaves. In many ways slaves were treated with a similar set of standards as livestock. Treating another human being as if he is an animal is an ethical violation that transcends culture, epoch, and religion. In this essay, I will show how the Hebrew Scriptures (what many also refer to the “Old Testament” of the Bible) call us to oppose any action that violates the ethical standards delineated therein. More to the point, I will show how the Gas Pipeline and Compression Station as proposed in Burlington County, New Jersey does violate the ethical standards delineated in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Hebrew Scriptures delineate an “order of creation” in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Whether you regard this narrative as an historically literal account or as a mythological account with moral and ethical implications, if you take Genesis seriously, you are among a significant subset of North Americans.

The Genesis “order of creation” suggests that there are 5 realms of “being”. We might think of them as strata. The highest order is the Godly realm. Beneath this, in order, are the human realm, the animal realm, and the earthly (rocks, trees, rivers, dirt, etc.) realm. Lastly, the lowest realm of reality acknowledged in the Scriptures is a realm of death... some form of spiritual death. The Genesis narrative invites the reader to understand these strata from the perspective of lower to higher moral prerogative. In other words, the Godly realm conveys a higher moral demand than, for instance, the human realm. So for instance, if there were a dispute between God and man, the man must defer to God by moral compulsion.

And so the order of creation suggested by Genesis in the Bible leads us to understand that it is morally wrong to treat a human as a God, and to treat God as a human. This is what makes slavery a moral wrong according to Genesis. Slavery in the 19th Century North America was a practice of treating certain humans as if they were animals. It was a violation of the order of creation. Humans should no more be treated as animals than as Gods. By this logic animals should also not be treated as if they are rocks or trees. And so the ethical treatment of animals – that is to respect them as a higher order of creation than rocks and trees – is also a moral imperative if the Genesis narrative is to be instructive. They should not be regarded as humans or as Gods either... they are animals. But they are not dirt.

And so the dirt itself is also a sacred realm. While dirt (or a rock or a tree) is not given as high an ethical value as a human or animal (or God), it should also not be treated as if it belongs to the realm of death. Humans are under a moral compulsion to treat the earth ethically. The Genesis creation narrative gives us a framework for respecting the rocks, trees, lakes, and earth as something with spiritual value. And so we can appeal to Genesis if we want to oppose any treatment of the earth that is not essential (and/or beneficial) for the survival of animals, humans, or God.

When a human government is responsible for a project that violates one (or more) of the moral imperatives regarding these realms, those who take Genesis seriously should speak out.

The Pipeline route and Compression station location as proposed for the New Jersey Natural Gas Southern Reliability Link is a violation of the order of creation in that it places an unethical risk on the human realm.

The New Jersey Legislature has already established a regulation (N.J.A.C. 14:7-1.4a) that mandates all pipeline bearing any pressure greater than 250 pounds per square inch be placed a minimum of 100 feet from any occupied structure. The New Jersey Natural Gas Southern Reliability Link, as proposed for construction in Burlington County, will be laid as close as 28 feet from occupied structures and carry a pressure of 722psi, meaning that the regulation will have to be waived before this pipeline can be built.

Why should such a regulation be waived? It is a regulation that, in its own way, attempts to preserve due respect for the human realm. Failures in high-pressure systems place nearby objects (and people) in danger. And so in terms of Genesis, that regulation makes sure that the human realm is not subject to “lower realm” treatment. It might, for instance, be acceptable to build such a pipeline *more than* 100 feet from a residence, as it might not be considered an ethical

mistreatment of the earthly realm to do so. But if the State Legislature has already established that it would be a violation of the human realm to build such a pipeline within those boundaries, then the only reason to waive such a regulation would be an appeal to a *higher*, i.e. *Godly* realm. Thus far, to my knowledge, God has yet to speak about the pipeline.

The same argument can be made for constructing a Compression Station within a mile radius of several schools and hundreds of homes. (The Compression Station as proposed has a 1 mile Potential Impact Radius (PIR) - the area that could be in danger should an accident occur). A discussion about building such a Station in an area where the PIR would affect only the animal and earthly realm would be helpful and would call for a greater tolerance for risk.

To think of it another way, it should be minimally understood that the Compression Station proposed for Burlington County poses some risk of explosion and/or leakage. As one moves up the order of creation from one strata to another, the impact of that risk is amplified. So if it is a 1% risk of explosion, and if that risk is deemed acceptable in its potential impact on the earthly realm, it should be re-measured according to the impact on the animal realm. Then it should be re-measured again according to the human realm. Not that the actual risk percentage increases, but that the amount of tolerable risk decreases as you consider the impact on higher realms of creation.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, there are an average (measured over 5 years) of 14 fatalities and 70 injuries requiring hospitalization per year due to so-called "Serious" Pipeline Incidents. Given the potential risk of death and serious injury due to the proximity of people to these Pipelines, the only moral response is to abandon the notion of construction in any region that places occupied structures within the PIR.

Such a decision should be automatic. There ought to be very little debate about how much spiritual value we place on members of the human realm. This much, at least, we learned from the slavery debacle. That is what regulations are for to begin with, to prevent decisions that, for instance might be financially tempting but unethical.

We have not even begun to address the entire scope of potential harm to the human realm posed by the New Jersey Natural Gas Southern Reliability Link. But we have shown how the risks mentioned make the construction unethical in its proposed location.

Returning to Genesis, the narrative says that the first man and woman ("Adam" and "Eve") are placed onto the created earth, filled as it was with animals and plants, and they were told to "guard" and "keep" it. ("Guarding" and "keeping" being decent English translations for what the Hebrew text says.) We can further understand the instructions given to them as binding on us as well.

The meaning conveyed is that we, the inhabitants of the human realm, are given the authority by the Creator to make decisions about the world we live in. But by directing us specifically with words like "guard" and "keep", the God in this narrative has established a morality regarding the decisions we make. The God in the narrative did not tell the man and the woman to "do whatever seems right to you". They were told to make decisions that would also be right for the earth and its inhabitants, both human and animal. Our decisions, according to the Genesis narrative, should be able to satisfy the responsibilities of guardianship and stewardship.

If there are any ways to accomplish the good goal of moving natural gas from the Marcellus Shale to the New Jersey coast that does not put human lives at obvious risk, and that places the animal kingdom and the ground itself at an acceptable level of risk, then it should be the highest priority of governments, businesses, and citizens to press for those ways. But to ignore the clear risks that would be constantly present at public and private schools, preschools, businesses, churches, public service facilities, and residential communities who draw drinking water from the ground below them, all of which are within the Potential Impact Radius of the proposed project *and* to ignore these risks in deference to a corporate profit/loss projection is to abdicate our spiritual responsibilities as human beings.

For this reason I, as a Pastor and as a man who takes seriously the meaning and message of the Hebrew Scriptures, oppose the route proposed for the New Jersey Natural Gas Southern Reliability Link. This pipeline does not benefit any of the local residents, yet the residents are forced to absorb the adverse environmental and economic impacts, not to mention the safety risks during the construction phase and the ongoing dangers these pipelines present in the event of leaks and explosions.

Signed,

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