

7

Environmental Virtue Ethics

Rosalind Hursthouse

Environmental ethics is concerned with the articulation and defence of what I shall call ‘the green belief’—the belief, namely, that a fairly radical change in the way we engage with nature is imperative. Environmental virtue ethics, then, is concerned with articulating and defending the green belief in virtue ethics terms, rather than in the terms of its two rivals, utilitarianism and deontology. This chapter is about what an environmental virtue ethics might be like. I consider two significantly different versions. First, we might have an environmental virtue ethics that seeks to articulate and defend the green belief in terms of old and familiar virtues and vices that are given a new interpretation when applied to the new field of our relations with nature. The second version goes beyond the first by introducing one or two new virtues, explicitly concerned with our relations with nature. (Note, in the description of both versions, a stress on the ‘new’. It is pretty much agreed ground amongst environmental ethicists that the truth of the green belief calls for ‘a new ethic’, but just how new, and new in just what way remains unclear and extremely tendentious.)

OLD VIRTUES AND VICES

I begin by illustrating (with necessary brevity) how much mileage I think can be got out of the old virtues and vices when they are used to articulate and defend the green belief.¹ One of the earliest modern philosophy books devoted to environmental issues was Passmore’s *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*. Without explicitly espousing virtue ethics, which barely existed at the time, Passmore argued in defence of the green belief in largely virtue and vice terms, claiming that it is primarily through the vices of greed, self-indulgence, and short-sightedness that we have brought about, and are continuing to bring about, ecological disasters and that what was needed to avert them was ‘that old-fashioned procedure, thoughtful action’ (1974: 194)—or, as virtue ethicists would say, the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom.

The point that greed, self-indulgence, and short-sightedness are very much to blame is not, I think, questioned by any environmentalist. It can, and frequently does,

¹ I wrote the final version of this chapter before reading Louke van Wensveen’s (2000) wonderful book, which shows that writers have found it quite natural to invoke over 170 old and familiar virtues in the context of environmental ethics.

form an implicit part of the most straightforward 'human-centred' utilitarian defence of the green belief, and of green economists' and scientists' defences. That some of our practices are, or have been, just plain short-sighted as far as our own interests are concerned is the most straightforward position to defend. No one, no matter how indifferent to environmental issues in general, welcomes air pollution in their city, or the unavailability of uncontaminated shellfish, or being made sick by their water. True, most people believe that 'the government should do something about it' in a way that neither raises their taxes nor prohibits their doing any of the things they have become accustomed to doing, but this response, the defence will plausibly claim, is just short-sightedness all over again. There isn't a quick fix; there is not any way in which the pollution can be halted and turned around without our forgoing a number of practices and activities that we, at least in the 'developed' nations, think of as enjoyments that are part of ordinary pleasant life.

Is it greedy and self-indulgent of us to want to enjoy such things? This is a much less straightforward position to defend, but much of the literature in environmental ethics (by no means just the minute amount that argues in terms of virtue ethics) suggests that convincing others, and ourselves, of the far reaching truth of the green belief, will necessarily involve bringing us all to see that it is. At the moment, a very small number of people have come to see their previous enjoyment of a very small number of 'ordinary' things—the eating of meat and the wearing of fur coats, the acquisition of new mahogany furniture, the owning of several cars—as greedy and self-indulgent, and changed their practices.

However, such a shift in moral self-assessment clearly does not come about just through the recognition that our current practices are short-sighted, if at all. People usually convert to vegetarianism on moral, rather than health, grounds because of some sort of concern about the animals we standardly consume. A change in the many ways in which we use animals, particularly for food, can be defended, in virtue ethics terms, by reference not only to the vices of greed and self-indulgence, but also to that of cruelty and the corresponding lack of the virtue of compassion, without any attempt to defend the idea that animals have rights.² Few people nowadays are prepared to deny outright that a great deal of animal suffering is involved in the processes that bring cheap meat to our supermarket shelves. A surprising number still believe that the consumption of meat is necessary for human health, but once that ignorance is dispelled, the animal suffering is revealed to be quite gratuitous and our practices thereby cruel. The fact that I myself, as an ordinary deskbound city-dweller, am not actually out and about inflicting cruelty on chickens, sheep, cows, pigs, and so on, may preserve me from being rightly called 'cruel' but I do not merit being called compassionate, if, knowing about the cruel practices, I still enjoy their fruits, any more than I merit being called just if I knowingly enjoy the fruits of slave labour while congratulating myself on not actually being a slave owner.

² For a beautifully clear discussion of ancient Greek defences of animals that did not appeal to animal rights (even when maintaining that we owed justice to them) see Sorabji (1993), especially chapter 11.

It has long been recognized that, although the vices do not form a unity, some of them certainly aggravate others. The old, familiar, vices of pride and vanity make us unwilling to acknowledge our greed, self-indulgence, short-sightedness, and lack of compassion; dishonesty, exercised in the form of self-deception, enables us to blind ourselves to relevant facts and arguments and find excuses for continuing as we are (think of the people who are still pretending that global warming isn't happening); cowardice makes us unwilling to go out on a limb and risk the contempt of our peers by propounding unpopular views, and so on.

It seems clear that much of what is wrong about our current practices with regard to nature springs from these familiar and ancient human vices—played out, in environmental ethics, on an unfamiliar stage. And it may well be that if we could find a way of releasing many human beings from the grip of these familiar vices, the change in our current ways of going on would be so extraordinarily radical that it would indeed adequately set the scene for all the changes that environmentalists dream of. After all, no one suggests that we need a new ethic to deal with the human-centred moral problems of poverty, war, and, quite generally, 'man's inhumanity to man'. We suppose that if (and what a big 'if') we could somehow induce many more of ourselves to be truly compassionate, benevolent, unselfish, honest, unmaterialistic, long-sighted, just, patient—virtuous, in familiar ways, in short—the way human beings live would be radically different, and the entirely human-centred moral problems that our own vices create would become things of the past. And if these hitherto intractable human-centred ones, why not the environmental ones as well?

This does not seem to be an unreasonable position, though it perhaps needs to be supplemented by the mention of one more virtue, which, although old, has become somewhat unfashionable in recent decades and thereby unfamiliar, namely humility, which has been emphasized by Thomas Hill Jr. (1983). (Hill calls the virtue 'proper humility' in order to distinguish it from those failings or vices that many people nowadays would find to be connoted by describing someone as 'humble'—obsequiousness, false modesty, wimpishness, and the like.)

Proper humility is the virtue traditionally opposed to the vice of arrogance, the undue assumption of dignity, authority, power, or knowledge, and a constantly recurring theme in environmental ethics—especially in writings that call for a new 'biocentric' approach—has been that we should, indeed, must, recognize and, in recognizing, perforce, abandon our undue assumption of dignity, authority, power, and knowledge—our arrogance in short—in relation to nature. Notwithstanding the surprisingly common belief that Darwinism shows that we are to be dignified as the top species, it gives us no reason to suppose that we are any such thing. As Stephen Clark, early on in environmental ethics, nicely put it, 'We sometimes speak of the dinosaurs as failures; there will be time enough for that judgement when we have lasted even one tenth as long' (1977: 112). The rationality that Western philosophical tradition has made the distinguishing mark of our superiority may well turn out to be, in evolutionary terms, a poor strategy. By the same token, our rationality, whether in its own right, or as the mark of our having been made in the image of God, gives us no especial authority. We do not have 'dominion' over nature; it is not true, as

Aristotle claimed, that plants exist for the sake of animals and all other animals exist for the sake of human beings. We can—that is, it is possible for us to—make use of plants and animals and indeed minerals and other inanimate things, but the old idea that we can do so without restraint, and that bountiful nature would somehow make good our depredations has now been proved to be a fantasy. (It is a notable fact, which might strike one as enragingly arrogant, or heart-wrenchingly innocent, that Aristotle believed that no species could be destroyed.) Our power over nature, we have discovered, is much more limited than we supposed when we first got modern science going, mostly because, as we discovered rather recently, our knowledge and understanding of the biosphere is in its infancy. (I think it is correct to say that the undue assumption of our power over, and knowledge of, nature is comparatively recent. Prior to the dawn of modern science (whenever we might date that) we may have thought that we had superiority and authority, but I don't think we were under any illusion that we had much of the power over nature that knowledge brings until industrialization.)

In that paragraph on arrogance I crudely sum up an extensive body of environmental ethics literature. Most of the literature that emphasizes such points is, polemically, directed towards establishing the inherent or intrinsic worth or value of individual living things or biotic communities but, in the context of virtue ethics, it serves equally well as a convincing condemnation of our arrogance—and thereby as a call to the unfashionable virtue of humility.

It can be seen that defending the green belief in terms of the old virtues and vices involves a particular strategy. Each old virtue or vice mentioned is considered in the context of the new area of our relations with nature, and thereby acquires a new application or dimension. I have briefly alluded to the old virtues of prudence, practical wisdom, compassion, and proper humility, and the old vices of greed, self-indulgence, short-sightedness, cruelty, pride, vanity, dishonesty, and arrogance. We acquire a new perception, or understanding, of what is involved in being compassionate, or greedy or short-sighted or properly humble or arrogant; some of the old virtues and vices get reconfigured. And, we might well say, from the virtue ethics standpoint, this has been a standard strategy for ethical advance. (We might note a parallel strategy in much deontological environmental ethics; you take a familiar old moral rule or duty, such as the duty not to kill, or to harm, and you play it out on a different stage, thereby giving it a new interpretation.)

STILL HUMAN-CENTRED?

Is a virtue ethics thus reconfigured human-centred? Well, it is obviously still concerned with what sort of people we human beings should be and what we should do. But any normative ethics is concerned with the rightness or wrongness of human actions, with what we human beings should do and be and there is nothing in the environmental ethics literature that calls for a new ethic to suggest that there is anything wrong with that. However, there is more than a whiff of a much less widespread human-centredness in Hill which, having noted his views, we should pause to consider.

Hill argues that neither utilitarianism nor deontology can account for the wrongness of wantonly destroying a living thing such as a tree. But when he moves on to account for its wrongness in the virtue ethical terms of proper humility and arrogance, his discussion disconcertingly parallels Kant's account of the wrongness of inflicting gratuitous suffering on animals. And this is notoriously human-centred. Kant held that the animals' suffering was incidental. What is really wrong with cruelty to animals is that it leads to cruelty to one's fellow human beings. Hill, similarly, holds that what is wrong with lack of proper humility in regard to nature is its dangerous tendency to lead the agent to treat other persons disrespectfully.³

Most philosophers who deplore the way we use animals have long made two objections to Kant's account. One is that it is based on a false empirical premise. Notwithstanding their enjoyment of watching bullfights, the Spaniards are not notably crueller to each other than members of other European nations. The second, deeper, objection is that Kant's account simply misses the point. Of course the animals' suffering matters. That is why it is right to describe the gratuitous infliction of it as cruel and to deplore it thereby, regardless of whether or not it leads to cruelty to human beings. How manifestly perverse it would be to account for the wrongness of cruelty to small children not in terms of what it did to the children but in terms of how it led to cruelty to rational adults! And most environmental philosophers would want to make the same two objections to Hill. It is quite implausible to say that being humbled before nature promotes humility before persons, and, more importantly, the untoward death of living things matters. That is why it is right to describe me as acting arrogantly if I assume dominion and authority over the lives of non-rational living things, and act as though they were mine to dispose of at a whim, and to deplore my action thereby, regardless of whether or not I am likely to act arrogantly to other humans.

However, it is Hill's Kantian predilections that lead him down this path. He is thinking of virtue (vice) as a tendency to right (wrong) action independently specified, and his paradigms of right (wrong) action involve other human beings. But virtue ethics, as is well known, specifies right and wrong action in terms of the virtues and vices. If cruelty is a vice, then to recognize an act as one of cruelty to animals is thereby to recognize it as wrong, and no further account of wherein its wrongness consists is called for. Similarly, if arrogance is a vice, to recognize an act of wanton destruction of a living thing as arrogant is thereby to recognize it as wrong and no further account of wherein its wrongness consists is called for. So, in particular, no account in terms of its dangerous tendency to lead to the disrespectful treatment of humans is called for. So virtue ethics need not take on the excessive human-centredness of Hill's account.

It is true that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics holds that the virtues benefit their possessor, that they are necessary and (with a bit of luck) sufficient for *eudaimonia*, for living well as a human being. Does this claim entail that human well-being is the only thing that really matters morally, or that it is the top value, ranked above any other (in an improperly human chauvinistic way)? Some environmentalist philosophers seem

³ '(T)hose who value such traits as humility, gratitude, and sensitivity to others have reason to promote the love of nature,' 224, my italics.

to suppose so, but it is unclear why. However, I do not want to dodge this issue, and I shall return to it at the end of the chapter.

Sometimes the disquiet seems to amount to no more than the thought that we should stop thinking about our virtues and vices—and thereby ourselves—and direct our attention to the natural world. And there may be a grain of practical truth in this thought. How, after all, is the reconfiguration of the familiar virtues and vices to be brought about except by a radical change in our ways of thinking and feeling about, and hence acting in relation to, the natural world? Is it not just this change that, for example, Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, Paul W. Taylor, and Holmes Rolston III have attempted, with some success, to bring about? But a ‘way of thinking, feeling and acting in relation to’ some field or area of activity is, quite often, an ethical character trait, a virtue or a vice. If what is needed is or are a new way or ways, perhaps what is needed is at least one new virtue, explicitly concerned with our relations to nature.

This brings us to a consideration of the second version an environmental virtue ethics might take.

Before we embark on exploring this, we should note that the introduction—or discovery—of a new virtue is a formidable task. As an ethical character trait, a virtue, say, honesty, is far more than a mere disposition or tendency to go in for certain sorts of actions (say, honest ones). For a start, someone who is honest not only does what is honest but does so for certain reasons, not, for example, simply because they think honesty is the best policy. Further, virtue is also concerned with feelings or emotions; it also involves dispositions to certain sorts of emotional reactions, including finding certain things enjoyable and others painful or distressing. On the more intellectual side, it involves a certain perceptive capacity with regard to the area of the virtue in question (such as, in the case of honesty, an acute eye for occasions on which we are all about to connive unwittingly at dishonesty) and ‘practical wisdom’—the capacity to reason correctly about what is to be done—which itself involves reasoning in relation to good ends. And all these apparently disparate elements can form a unity in human nature; that is, they can be recognized as a way a human being, given human psychology, could be.

And finally, if we are not to depart too radically from tradition, this way that we could be should have a recognizable preliminary version; a way that children can be that, although on the right track, still needs to be developed and expanded, and ultimately corrected, by practical wisdom.

Standardly, though by no means invariably, this complex and elusive concept of an ethical character trait is grasped through a noun which names the character trait (e.g. ‘generosity’), with an associated adjective (‘generous’) that can apply to people and to acts—to people as possessing the character trait, to acts that, though not necessarily springing from the virtue, are typical of it. So the introduction or discovery of an unfamiliar, ‘new’, virtue would, on the face of it, need to involve the invention or coining of a new term or concept, which named a complex unity of dispositions to act and feel for certain sorts of reasons, and to see and respond to things in certain sorts of ways, which we had discovered, or realized, was a way human beings, given human psychology, could be. And this complex unity would have to be the sort of

thing we could conceive of as being inculcated in children as part of their moral education—not totally against the grain, but expanding on and correcting some natural inclination(s) they have.

ONE NEW VIRTUE

Hill himself mentions two features that seem to be involved in being rightly related to nature which proper humility does not capture—some sort of aesthetic appreciation of it and some sense of gratitude towards it—and it is noteworthy that finding beauty in nature, and feeling gratitude to it for, not only its beauty, but its abundance, are emotional reactions that are perfectly consistent with proper humility but which rescue one from the proper humility's being crushing or dispiriting. (Could the reflection that human beings and all their works are but an insignificant and fleeting part of the great unfolding of the natural world fail to be crushing if it were not ameliorated by the joyous thought that we are part of something glorious?) The aesthetic appreciation of nature has, as a topic, its own extensive philosophical literature—in aesthetics—and it is not easy, in this area, to transfer aesthetics talk into ethics talk. However, there are certainly some suggestive lines of thought to be pursued.

R. W. Hepburn (1984), an aesthetician, has at least two important essays which find many echoes in environmental ethics literature. One explores 'the enjoyment of natural beauty as tending towards an ideal of oneness with nature or as leading to the disclosure of unity in nature' (1984: 17) and the other analyses the concept of an emotion, wonder, that, as he says, 'occupies in a paradigmatic way exactly that territory common to the aesthetic, moral and religious' (1984: 7).

Some of the points that Hepburn makes about wonder in relation to nature could well be taken over into an account of (proper) humility, to which he explicitly links it, but he also links it, surely rightly, to openness, to gratitude, and to delight. The interesting question for virtue ethics is whether the emotion of wonder might resemble the emotions of fear and anger in being one whose correct orientation amounts to a virtue. Being rightly disposed with respect to fear amounts to the virtue of courage. Being rightly disposed with respect to anger amounts to a virtue, nameless in Aristotle's time and to this very day. (Following Aristotle, in translation we call it 'patience', while recognizing that this, as he says, 'tends towards describing the deficiency' of not getting angry when one should.) Could being rightly disposed with respect to wonder—i.e. being disposed to feel wonder the right way, towards the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right degree, on the right occasions, in the right manner, and to act accordingly—count as a virtue, a character trait of the required complex sort? It may well be that it could.

There is, one might say, unrecognized by generations of philosophers and psychologists, a human emotion as familiar and everyday as fear and anger which is wonder, typically expressed (in English speakers) by the happy cry 'Oh isn't that wonderful!' (or nowadays, with unwitting appropriateness, 'awesome!') that children come up with spontaneously as soon as they have learnt to talk. (In fact it is not quite true that it has always been unrecognized. Descartes has it in the *Passions of the Soul*.) If

Hepburn is right, this emotion can be felt in accordance with, or contrary to, reason just as fear and anger can. Some objects, for instance nature and its works, are proper objects of it; some, such as the merely novel or unfamiliar, are not. And getting this natural human emotion in harmony with reason really matters morally, just as getting the emotions of fear and anger in harmony with reason do. If we think and feel, not that nature is wondrous but that Disneyland or the Royal Family of Windsors are, that the other animals are not, but we are, that the seas are not but swimming pools on the twentieth floor of luxury hotels are, and act accordingly, then we will act wrongly, just as we do when we fear pain to ourselves but not to others, or are angered by justified criticism and not getting our own way but not angered by cruelty to animals or injustice to our fellow humans.

The putative virtue of being disposed to feel the emotion of wonder the right way, towards the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right degree, and so on is, I think, explicitly concerned with our relations to nature (who has written about wonder without talking about the wonders of nature?) and the exploration of this putative virtue, in that explicit connection, would probably form an instructive and inspiring part of an environmental virtue ethic. But it is not uniquely so concerned. Hepburn, after all, discusses it in relation to works of art, and it would be odd for a philosopher to deny that the works of the Great Dead Philosophers are proper objects of wonder. So we might look further, for a putative virtue that takes our relations with nature as its unique concern and incorporates just that part of right wondering which is concerned with recognizing the wonders of nature. (Compare the way the personal virtue of justice incorporates that part of 'patience' which is concerned with being angered by injustice to others.)

ANOTHER NEW VIRTUE

The existing literature suggests the possibility of a further new virtue, one which, unlike the putative virtue of being disposed to feel the emotion of wonder in the right way and so on, has actually acquired something in the way of a name—namely the term 'respect for nature'. The term was originally brought into environmental ethics by Paul W. Taylor, who used it to signify what he calls an 'ultimate moral attitude' rather than a virtuous character trait. However there are at least three, related, problems with Taylor's account, all of which are side-stepped or dissolved if we recognize his 'respect for nature' as a character trait rather than simply as an attitude (even an 'ultimate moral attitude') which I want to spend a little time discussing.

Before I do, I must stress how admirable I think Taylor's introduction and discussion of 'respect for nature' are. I do take him, along with Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, and Holmes Rolston III, as amongst the really ground breaking, towering, figures in environmental ethics. They, as far as I am concerned, are the people who came up with the real practical wisdom about the subject, so I regard the following points as relatively speaking, mere philosophers' quibbles.

The first problem concerns how it can come about that someone has 'respect for nature' in Taylor's sense.

Taylor begins with the (actually very old Aristotelian) idea that any living thing has a *telos*—a good of its own—and the related claim that, as such, any living thing can be benefited (by that which enables it to achieve its *telos*) or harmed (by that which interferes with its doing so). He then adds the claim that any living thing possesses ‘inherent worth’, as a member of ‘Earth’s Community of Life’. This latter claim, he says, is not the sort of statement that can be proved; rather, to regard or conceive of living things as having ‘inherent worth’ is to adopt the attitude of respect for nature. And he makes his commitment to a Kantian theoretical framework explicit by drawing a parallel between this ultimate moral attitude and that of the attitude of respect for persons as persons. To regard persons as having inherent worth or ‘dignity’ is, in Kantian ethics, he says, to adopt the attitude of respect for persons *as* persons.

Taylor’s construal of Kant (which I think is probably wrong) on respect for persons as persons is instructive, for he says ‘When this is adopted as an ultimate moral attitude it involves the disposition to treat every person as having inherent worth or human dignity’ (1981: 207, my italics). Twenty years ago, such a claim might well have passed without question, but the more recent, fruitful, exchanges between Kantians and virtue ethicists prompt several very awkward ones. The disposition in question is clearly supposed to be much more than a tendency of intention. It is supposed to be an efficacious tendency—a tendency to succeed in treating people as having inherent worth or human dignity. But how does adopting the attitude of respect for persons bring in its train the practical wisdom that enables one to know how to treat a person as having human dignity when, for example, their cultural or social expectations are different from yours and unknown to you? How indeed does it bring in its train the ability to recognize a member of a despised race or religion or sex as a person at all? How does it bring the perceptual capacities and emotional sensibilities needed to appreciate what is called for in particular situations when there appears to be a forced choice between treating one person as having human dignity and another as not having it? How does it bring with it either strength of will or a systematic reorientation of the emotions such that you standardly treat people as having human dignity ungrudgingly and without resentment and moreover with the right light in your eye?

No one gets to have all that just by ‘adopting an attitude’. These dispositions and capacities have to be inculcated, from childhood, in the moral training of character.

Taylor always speaks of ‘taking up’ or ‘adopting’ the attitude of respect for nature, as though this were something one could do more or less overnight, through a rational process. But as people familiar with his writings will know, adopting the attitude of respect for nature turns out to involve acquiring a set of dispositions and capacities similar to those that would have to be involved in having the efficacious disposition to treat people as having human dignity. What he describes, and explores, brilliantly, is being rightly oriented to nature, through and through, in action, emotion, perception, sensibility, and understanding. What is involved in ‘adopting’ this attitude would, according to what he says about it, manifestly have to be a complete transformation of character. Really coming to see oneself as sharing ‘a common bond’ with all living things would involve a radical change in one’s emotions and perceptions, one’s whole way of perceiving and responding to the world, of one’s reasons for action and thereby actions. And that is the sort of change that cannot (for the most part)

come about just through, say, reading a philosophical book and deciding to change; it cannot (for the most part) simply be 'adopted' or 'taken up'.

So he has a problem. Can having 'respect for nature', as he describes it, not come about at all, given that it cannot simply be adopted or taken up? The problem is solved if we construe it as a virtue. You can't just decide to have a virtue; virtuous character traits cannot be acquired theoretically by attending lectures or reading books or articles and just deciding to be that way. But they can be acquired through moral habituation or training, beginning in childhood and continued through self-improvement.

The second problem with Taylor's account is his reliance on the contentious notion of 'inherent worth' which, *if introduced in a foundational premise*, notoriously brings standard problems with it. Does it or does it not admit of degrees? Either answer lands one in difficulties, as the ethical literature based on the foundational premise that the other animals share inherent or intrinsic worth or value with human beings illustrates. It seems impossible to allow that it admits of degree without claiming that human beings (or at least all the human beings who are persons) have the highest degree and thereby what promised to be a radical reformation of our old understanding of ourselves in relation to the other animals loses most of its revisionary character. But to the modern city-dwelling philosopher—and her readers—the alternative seems hopelessly impractical. The Jains may command our admiration but we do not go into print saying that that is how we all should live.

From the perspective of virtue ethics, Taylor's introduction of the contentious notion of inherent worth is superfluous. 'Regarding a living thing as having inherent worth' amounts to nothing more (though nothing less) in his account than regarding facts about whether a proposed course of action will benefit or harm a living thing as providing non-instrumental reasons for or against it, and it is his rich and insightful identification of this range of reasons which is significant. For, once they are identified, we can readily see how they might be used to inculcate a character trait—the virtue of 'respect for nature', or, as I would prefer to call it (given the restrictive connotations of 'respect'), 'being rightly oriented to nature'.

This range of reasons not only might be, but in fact *are*, given to children by adults who are beginning to inculcate in them at least the beginnings of a virtuous character trait oriented to nature. The child pokes or hits or tears at the living thing, and the parents say 'Don't do that, you'll harm it.' Or the child swats or slashes at a living thing and the parents say 'Don't do that, you'll kill it.' Or the child is taught how to look after a plant or animal—'You have to do this, because it needs water', 'She wants to go for a walk, take her out.' Or the child condemns some living thing's way of going on as 'stupid' and the parents say 'No, it's not stupid, it's brilliant; what it's doing is this' and then explain how what the living thing is doing results in its achieving its *telos*. And as nature-loving (not yet 'nature-respecting') parents and teachers know, one of the best ways to enable children to get over their disgust and fear, whether instinctive or learned, of various living things is to tell or show the child how the thing in question works—how it achieves its *telos*—and/or how this sort of thing, living in its sort of way, contributes to the life-processes of other

sorts of things, including us. Whereupon the children start saying (in effect), 'How wonderful!' rather than 'Yuck!'

Such training begins to shape a particular way of perceiving, acting in relation to, feeling and thinking about, the natural world. We could well say, speaking colloquially, that such training involves teaching a child to recognize the inherent or intrinsic worth or value of at least some living things. (Only some, as things are at the moment, which is why I stressed 'nature-loving' as opposed to 'nature-respecting'.) But there is a very important theoretical difference at issue here. On the one hand, we may start, as virtue ethics does, with the training of children in reasons for action and emotional responses and the colloquial redescription of such training as teaching the child to recognize the inherent or intrinsic worth or value of living things. On the other hand, we may start, as Taylor and many other 'biocentric' deontological ethicists do, with foundational premises ascribing such worth or value to them.

One might bring out the difference as follows. Suppose it is agreed ground that bringing up children to be, at least partly, rightly oriented to nature in fact involves training them through the range of reasons suggested above. (This contrasts with the implausible claim that the training involves no more than 'Don't do this, do do that, look at this, be interested in that, because it has inherent worth.')

Then the stance of those who seek foundational premises is that the unity of this practice must be underpinned or guided by something unconsciously or dimly apprehended by the parents and latched on to by the children, namely, the inherent worth of the living things in question, the property that they all share. And, granted the existence of such a property, it is clearly part of the philosopher's task to give an account of it, by working out what the 'worth/value-making characteristic' is that everything with this property has in common. But the stance of those who, following Wittgenstein, regard the search for such foundational premises as a philosophical mistake is that the unity of the practice so far described (insofar as it has a unity) need not be underpinned or guided by anything, let alone by any one thing such as inherent worth somehow apprehended by the parents.

The third problem with Taylor's account is this—he limits his ascription of inherent worth to individual living things (though it seems that these include species' populations and ecosystems). Hence what he has, officially, identified is not so much 'respect for nature' as 'respect for living nature'. According to him, things have inherent worth only because, or insofar as, they are 'members of the Earth's Community of Life'. And he identifies the characteristic outlook of someone with 'respect for nature' as follows:

one sees one's membership in the Earth's Community of Life as providing a common bond with all the different species of animals and plants that have evolved over the ages. One becomes aware that, like all other living things on our planet, one's very existence depends on the fundamental soundness and integrity of the *biological* system of nature. When one looks at this domain of life in its totality, one sees it to be a complex and unified web of interdependent parts. (1986: 44, my italics)

Now what does seem a little odd about that, read strictly, is the insertion of 'biological' before the words 'system of nature'. Do the sun, the moon, and the seas, the

minerals in the earth, the ozone layer, have no role to play in maintaining the 'domain of life in its totality'? Is it not nature, animate *and* inanimate, that, in its totality, is seen to be a unified web? True, not much of the inanimate depends on the animate for its existence but why stress interdependence as the all-important feature of unification? Drawing a hard and fast distinction between the animate and the inanimate seems particularly inappropriate in the context of environmental ethics. Some years ago, when the rising of the seas and the consequent higher sea levels at high tide were recognized to be having an unmistakable deleterious impact, I remember reading that someone had brightly suggested we could solve the problem by blowing up the moon. And every environmentalist was (surely rightly) horrified, notwithstanding the inanimate nature of the moon. (Of course I know that the absence of the tides would kill a lot of plants and animals whose survival depends on their occurrence. My point is that many people's horror was, in fact, quite independent of those consequences of the proposed act of extra-terrestrial vandalism.)

Taylor is landed with this problem because of his attempt to provide a foundational premise about inherent worth. Things have inherent worth, when they do, because they share a common feature—being a member of the Earth's Community of Life. This gives the account a philosophically satisfying unity, and one can see that much of this would be lost if one tried to formulate a second feature, common to just the right inanimate things, and claimed that they had inherent worth because of it, yielding a disjunctive premise about what grounded inherent worth. But if we think of being 'rightly oriented to nature', not as an attitude founded on an adult's rational recognition of such a one-sentence premise but as a character trait arising from a childhood training that gives us particular reasons for action (and omission) in particular contexts, and shapes our emotional response of wonder, the hard and fast line he draws between the animate and the inanimate becomes insignificant. (That is why I implied above that the unity of the practice thus far described, which was of inculcating the beginnings of being rightly oriented towards living nature, wasn't much of a unity.)

Environmentally minded parents teach their children not only not to harm and kill the living but also not to despoil or destroy natural inanimate objects. Although a theory-obsessed parent might go to the lengths of teaching a child not to slash at a spider's web just because this might harm the spider, few nature-loving parents find it necessary to do so. The spider's web, notwithstanding its being inanimate, is reconstructed as an object of wonder—so delicate and light but so strong, so intricately patterned—and not to be wantonly destroyed simply because it is such an object. It fits into a spider's achieving its *telos* in such and such a way, and that is also part of what is wondrous about it, but in teaching this to children, who would look around to check that the web-maker was still alive and dependent upon it?

Spiders' webs, like ammonites and other fossils, make it impossible to draw Taylor's hard distinction between the animate and the inanimate. An ammonite is something else that is not to be wantonly destroyed but wondered at—once again so intricately patterned, and also so awesomely old. And, despite being inanimate, it is part of (not the present, or near present, but) the long past domain of life. 'Look,' one says to the child, 'do you know what this is—and *was*?' And the child is thunderstruck. Nor do we find ourselves suddenly talking in distinctively new ways

to our children when we come to the Grand Canyon, and similar rock formations. They are so intricately patterned, so old, and so huge, such proper objects of wonder, and have a connection with the domain of life insofar as the geological workings of our planet are inseparable from the workings of life on it, all being part of 'the system of nature', that 'unified web'.

As before, when we teach children not to slash mindlessly at spiders' webs, to look at fossils carefully and try to understand their shape, to be glad rather than sorry that the Grand Canyon is not rimmed with machines dispensing Coca-Cola, giving the reasons that we do, we could, colloquially, redescribe what we are doing as teaching them the inherent worth or intrinsic value of spiders' webs, fossils, and the Grand Canyon. But giving that colloquial redescription simply sidesteps the problem of advancing a foundational philosophical theory which has to start from some (indefinitely?) large set of premises to the effect that these things have such worth or value because or insofar as they are intricately patterned and/or delicate and light (or not delicate but incredibly hard and heavy) or fresh and new (or awesomely old) or tiny and yet still effective (the revelations of the microscope) or huge (the Grand Canyon again) or whatever.

The contrast here is between, on the one hand, trying to ground intrinsic/inherent value/worth/considerability in a few 'x-making characteristics' and, on the other, just starting with an indefinite range of reasons taught for responding, in the broadest sense, to nature, in certain ways. These include, at least, wondering at, looking hard at, finding out more about, rejoicing in, understanding why other people spend their whole lives studying, being anxious to preserve, not dismissing or ignoring or destroying or forgetting or assuming one can always put a price on . . . everything in the natural world.

At the moment, as I think we all know, none of us, however committed to environmentalism, has achieved any more than getting a few of our responses to a few of the things in the natural world right. Possession of the virtue of being rightly oriented to nature quite generally is still a long way off. But the green belief does, after all, call for a radical change in us, something rather more radical, one would suppose, than a change in a few theoretical beliefs about intrinsic worth that few people but philosophers are conscious of holding anyhow.

WHAT TO DO?

'But' it might be objected, 'what is the point of thinking of environmental ethics in virtue ethics' terms when it will manifestly fail to tell us what we should do? For whether we talk about reconfiguring the old virtues or recognizing a new one, we don't seem to get any answers to our pressing problems. All we get are some fairly obvious prohibitions against wanton, gratuitous, selfish, materialistic, and short-sighted consumption, harm, destruction, and despoliation.'

True enough. But suppose we turn to any other environmental ethics for guidance about what is morally required of us in detail in the way of actions and changes in life style starting, say, tomorrow. What will we find? Apart from the same fairly obvious prohibitions I think it must be admitted that the answer is 'Not much'.

I am not denying that Taylor, for example, offers principles intended to enable us to adjudicate between the competing claims of human beings and other living things. But the only things such principles clearly yield are the obvious prohibitions that even the palest green environmentalist is already living in accordance with. Has any one of my readers recently bought ivory or a caged tropical bird or hunted a rare wild mammal? One might interpret some of Taylor's principles as, more forcefully, yielding a prohibition against driving a car in, at least, all those circumstances in which one will inevitably kill a number of insects but not save any other lives, but Taylor himself does not construe them as doing so, speaking instead merely of the requirement to use anti-pollution devices on automobile exhausts. And not driving around in a car without an anti-pollution device seems another pretty obvious prohibition.

So if all we find are obvious prohibitions, but no guidance for further detailed changes, the questions arise 'Why not? What's still missing? Is the normative theory incomplete or what?' I don't know whether any non-virtue ethicist has ever answered these questions, but virtue ethics has a straightforward and, I think, extremely plausible answer.

Virtue ethicists seek answers to questions about what we should do and how we should live by considering what someone who really possessed virtue to a high degree would characteristically do, and how they would live. And we have little idea of the answers to such questions in the context of environmental ethics because we have so few exemplars of the relevant virtues, real or fictional, if any.

Suppose that being rightly oriented to nature is pre-eminently, the relevant virtue. (I think, at this stage, that little hangs on the distinction between reconfiguring the old virtues and recognizing this new one. Acquisition of the new would go along with reconfiguring the old, and anyone who had adequately reconfigured the old could be truly described as having acquired the new.) This virtue is not a character trait we see manifested by any academic philosophers who, inevitably, lead lives of standard Western, materialistic comfort, driving to shop at their supermarkets, buying new clothes, listening to opera on their CD players, dining in restaurants, writing their books and articles on computers, jetting to international conferences to present their views on environmental ethics, and teaching them to their students in large, land-occupying, buildings. (This does not mean that environmental philosophers are hypocritical, just that our sincerely held ethical beliefs still leave us far short of possessing virtue, in particular perhaps, the practical wisdom, permeating every virtue, that enables its possessor to know what to do in particular circumstances.)

It is possible, though this is contested, that we have glimpses of what it might *have* been like to live in accordance with the virtue of being rightly oriented to nature in the little we know of the lives of the Australian Aborigines and the Amerindians before European hegemony. But even if we knew a lot more about their lives and even if it were certain that they had possessed the virtue, this would not entail that that is how we should strive to live and be now. Human beings are, essentially, socially and historically situated beings and their virtuous character traits have to be situated likewise. A twenty-first-century city-dweller who possessed the virtue to some degree could hardly manifest it in just the same ways as Australian Aborigines and Amerindians

perhaps used to when they lived as hunter-gatherers. What we need to know is what would count as living in accordance with it *now* or in the near future.

One pessimistic possibility is that nothing would count, and that perhaps nothing ever will, because we have already made such a mess of things that there is no virtuous way of sorting them out by human means. In virtue ethics, the (putative) virtue of 'being rightly oriented to nature' is but one virtue amongst many; what one can, morally, do in its name is restrained by other virtues such as justice. Although any environmentalist may well believe that growth is not what we want, justice, if nothing else, restrains what any of us might do to prevent growth while there are still so many people in poorer countries who disagree, because their—and their children's—lives depend on economic growth.

This seems the right juncture to return, as promised, to the question whether virtue ethics is committed to the claim that *eudaimonia* or human well-being is the 'top value', ranked above any other in an improperly human chauvinistic way. The answer is that it is not. If anything counts as the 'top value' in virtue ethics, it is acting virtuously, and the pessimistic possibility envisaged above is not that our choice lies between human well-being and (as it were) the 'well-being' of the natural world, but that our past and present folly has put human well-being beyond our grasp, perhaps forever.

Virtue is an ideal of human excellence, constitutive of *eudaimonia* or living well as a human being. But *eudaimonia* was never something that we could be confident was within our individual grasp. Right back in Aristotle, there is the recognition that it requires 'a complete life' (1101a15) but that there are things one must sooner die than do (1110a27–8) and that it is nonsense to call someone *eudaimon*, however virtuous, if they are being broken on the wheel or surrounded by great disasters (1153b19–20). If I am living under the sway of evil tyrants, then *eudaimonia* may not be possible for me if, for example, they force on me the choice between action contrary to virtue and death by torture.⁴

Limited as this example is, it should suffice to remind us that whatever blocks virtuous activity blocks *eudaimonia*. It might be a few tyrants. It might be the nature of the society into which one was born, unwittingly, as a member of the privileged class whose past horrendous injustice is only just beginning to be righted. Perhaps I can live in accordance with the virtue of justice in such a society, in the vanguard with those bringing about the needed changes at considerable personal self-denial. But perhaps, given my family commitments or some disability which, in my society renders me helplessly dependent on others, I cannot; if I am to live at all, I am forced to live the life of the highly privileged dependent. And then *eudaimonia* is beyond my grasp, for willy-nilly, I shall, perforce, reap the rewards of injustice. Or it might be the nature of the world into which I was born, a world whose societies have become so predicated on despoiling nature that their very existence depends on continuing to do so.

⁴ Cf. Philippa Foot on the 'Letter-Writers' who died because they refused to go along with the Nazis. She says of them that they were so placed that it was impossible for them to pursue happiness 'by just and honourable means Happiness in life, they might have said, was not something possible for them.' See Foot (2001).

Perhaps I can live in accordance with the virtue of being rightly oriented to nature to some extent if I leave society. But then I will have cut myself off from the exercise of most of the other virtues. So *eudaimonia* is beyond my grasp.

Virtue ethics is 'about' human beings living well, but it is not committed, in advance, to our living well being a realizable state of affairs regardless of how we, or many of us, are living or have lived up until now. It is possible that we have already made such a mess that we shall not be able to live well, as part of the natural world, for many generations to come, if ever.

More optimistically, the very next generation may start to show us the way. Concern about the environment, and proto-versions of the virtue of being rightly oriented to nature, are currently much more widespread amongst children than they are amongst adults. Many of them have received more training in it than any of us did, and are beginning to have their own ideas about how they and we should live. At the time I began working on this chapter, in 1999, it was reported that 135,000 German schoolchildren had decided to help reduce their communities' emissions of greenhouse gases by 10 per cent, and within seven months had more than reached their target—something that (I believe) no government has achieved in a comparable time. It may be that they will choose to live in ways rather different from our ways, and that their children will choose to live in very different ones. If the deeper green versions of the green belief are true, it is a radical change in human beings' ways of living in the natural world that is called for. If the virtue ethics approach is right, it is hardly surprising that we, currently lacking the relevant virtues, should be unable to imagine, in any concrete detail, how we should live, and we should expect change to come about not primarily through philosophical argument, and not overnight, but through the actions and practical reasoning of people in whom the relevant virtues have been inculcated. Our current task is, thereby, to do what we can to develop those virtues in ourselves and our children, and to adhere to the 'obvious prohibitions' in the hope that we may bequeath to them a world that is not irrevocably spoiled.

COPYRIGHT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A shorter version of this essay appeared as Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtues', in 'Institutional Issues Involving Ethics and Justice', from *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*, Developed under the Auspices of the UNESCO, EOLSS Publishers, Oxford, UK.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle (2000). *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, S. R. L. (1977). *The Moral Status of Animals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Foot, Philippa (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 95.
- Hepburn, R. W. (1984). 'Wonder' and Other Essays. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hill Jr, T. E. (1983). 'Ideals of human excellence and preserving natural environments'. *Environmental Ethics*, 5: 211–24.

- Leopold, A. (1949) *A Sand County Almanac*. Reissued, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Naess, A. (1989). *Economy, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Passmore, J. (1974). *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. London: Duckworth.
- Rolston III, H. (1988). *Environmental Ethics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sorabji, Richard (1993). *Animal Minds and Human Morals*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Taylor, P. W. (1981). 'The Ethics of Respect for Nature'. *Environmental Ethics*, 1: 197–218.
- (1986). *Respect for Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wensveen, Louke van (2000). *Dirty Virtues*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON LIBRARY

Working Virtue

*Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral
Problems*

Edited by

REBECCA L. WALKER

PHILIP J. IVANHOE

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

MAY 11 2007