

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON

Dirty Virtues

The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics

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THE EMERGENCE OF ECOLOGICAL VIRTUE LANGUAGE

THE WORD “VIRTUE” HAS an old-fashioned ring to it. The word “vice” perhaps even more so. When as Westerners we hear these terms, we may think of professors belaboring the significance of the ancient Four Cardinal Virtues, or priests sermonizing on the perennial Three Theological Virtues and the Seven Deadly Sins. Even if we cannot exactly remember what they all are, we know these virtues and vices represent tradition, and so they inspire us with awe, or rather with resentment, or perhaps with an uneasy mixture of both. Then, of course, we may also think we have moved entirely beyond virtue and vice—either in skeptical rejection of tradition, or for lack of familiarity with it. Even so, “virtue” and “vice” will sound old-fashioned and hardly relevant to a book on the future-oriented and somewhat countercultural topic of ecological ethics.

I will not retort with an apology on the surprising relevance of established Western virtue traditions in an ecological age. Yet I will draw attention to a particular type of moral language that pervades the writings of those who seek to respond to the environmental crisis. In this mushrooming ecological literature, we are encouraged to care for our bioregions, to respect trees, to show compassion for the suffering of animals, to be humble and wise in the use of technology, to be frugal and creative in the use of limited resources, and to have hope in the face of impending global disaster. Conversely, we are warned to avoid the arrogance of anthropocentrism, to stop being cruel in our treatment of animals, to admit that we habitually project our fears onto nature, and to put a halt on our greed and the resulting manipulative exploitation of natural resources.

What would be an appropriate name for this language? The term “virtue language” (which includes vices as well) does seem appropriate. But then somehow we must indicate that we are not simply dealing with a rehash of tradition. Perhaps “ecological virtue language” is most descriptive, if somewhat mundane. I will use this expression in the remainder of the book.

Personally I like to think of the virtue language that ecologically minded people tend to use as “dirty virtues”—“dirty” because this language expresses a preoccupation with the earth (read: dirt = soil), and also because many ecological virtues would have been considered not particularly praiseworthy, or even vicious, during most of Western history (read: dirty = bad, taboo).

What does this dirty virtue language look like? The examples I have given immediately speak to the imagination. Respect for nature, caring, frugality, and hope clearly must be important attitudes in an ecological age. And arrogance, cruelty, and greed clearly must be avoided. Yet what exactly do we mean when we use these terms? Ecoliterature contains many thoughtful passages that relay the flavor of ecological virtues and vices. We also discover in this literature a much wider range of virtues and vices than we might expect. To give an idea of this richness in flavor and range, let me share some passages that describe ecological virtues:

Re-respecting nature literally involves “looking again.” We cannot attend to the quality of relations that we engage in unless we know the details that surround our actions and relations.¹

The proper response to an emerging sense of the vastness and opacity of “wild connection” is not a (further) retreat into our own small realms of (supposed) transparency. Instead: fascination, interest, humility. Bowing before the mysteries of the world, entering a kind of wild etiquette.²

Adherents to voluntary simplicity, those who content themselves with no more than they need, can now be found in significant numbers in most Western industrial societies and in some other societies as well. Deliberately abandoning the frenetic pursuit of material goods in favor of a simpler life-style, they are involved in recycling, home gardening, biking to work, and the rebellion against conspicuous consumption and planned obsolescence.³

Awe and amazement are the results of a rich creation story, and the awe we feel should encompass our very selves, since every self is part of the unfolding creation story. We feel our interconnection with other creatures and peoples on this surprising planet in this amazing universe of one trillion galaxies, each with 200 billion stars.⁴

I would define an ethical position most simply as this: acting to the best of one’s ability from a sensibility that simultaneously knows and values oneself as an individual; is compassionate through identification with human and nonhuman others and caring about others’ lives and well-being; and is creative, undergoing self-transformation through cultivating a relation to collectives ranging from human families to the planetary community.⁵

The richness of this language, and the fact that it flows from so many mouths, has inspired me to compile a catalogue of ecological virtues and vices—much as biologists record the variety of flora and fauna they encounter. This catalogue can be found in Appendix A, and I encourage my readers to dwell there for a while.

I have yet to come across a piece of ecologically sensitive philosophy, theology, or ethics that does not in some way incorporate virtue language. Ecological virtue language turns up in the writings of social ecologists as well as deep ecologists, bioregionalists as well as animal rights activists, creation theologians as well as environmental philosophers, mainstream theologians as well as radical ecofeminists. Within these different strands, however, ecological virtue language seems to turn up especially when authors assume a hortatory, personal, reflection-filled mode of writing. This most often happens in their concluding statements. Conversely, if a source contains much technical language, whether scientific, philosophical, theological, or metaethical, virtue language tends to turn up much less frequently. Still, even though remnants remain of the once widespread attempt to avoid normative discourse in the context of “objective” discussions, virtues and vices often seem to elude such a ban, so that even in more technical pieces authors can unabashedly use terms such as “respect” and “manipulation.”

At this point we may well ask: If such a rich variety of ecological virtues and vices exists in such a wide range of literature, why is this moral language not better known? Why, in fact, have some commentators even lamented the low profile of virtues in environmental ethics?⁶ This curious situation becomes understandable, I think, if we consider that those who have initiated key *methodological* discussions in the field of environmental ethics have generally not (or not primarily) been virtue ethicists.⁷ Discussions in environmental ethics have largely focused on rights, values, duties, principles, and consequentialist arguments. This emphasis has created a blind spot for a segment of ecological moral language that, quietly living between the often heated debates about the rights of trees or the intrinsic value of rocks, actually flourishes quite profusely.

But, we might protest, choice of method is political, so the low profile of ecological virtue language cannot be seen as an innocent oversight! Val Plumwood, one of the few authors who has recently promoted a virtue-based ecological ethic, develops this argument based on a feminist analysis of the public/private distinction:

Rights seem to have acquired an exaggerated importance in ethics as part of the prestige of the public sphere and the masculine, and the emphasis on separation and autonomy, on reason and abstraction. A more promising approach for an ethic of nature, and also one much more in line with the

current directions in feminism, would be to remove rights from the centre of the moral stage and pay more attention to some other less universalistic moral concepts such as respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship and responsibility. . . . These more local moral concepts, because of their dualistic construal as feminine, and their consignment to the private sphere as subjective and emotional, have been treated as peripheral and given far less importance than they deserve.⁸

I find Plumwood's thesis quite plausible.

I also believe other factors have contributed to the methodological "virtue blindness" of environmental ethicists. For one thing, consider the context of litigation, an important focus of reform environmentalism. Here virtue language has much less bite than the language of rights. (I imagine that appealing to a chemical company's love of nature in a court of law would be as effective as appealing to an ex-spouse's love of his or her children in a child custody case.) No wonder then that in the midst of heated litigation involving toxic cleanup, pollution control, and the destiny of forests, virtues have not received much attention.

Another reason for the virtue blindness of environmental ethicists may be that recent interest in virtue ethics is about as old as the field of environmental ethics itself. Both represent nodes of great creativity in the field of ethics. We can imagine them as seeds that sprouted relatively independently and that only now, as plants, are beginning to cross-pollinate. Such a scenario is quite plausible given the specialized nature of much academic reflection and the limited ability of scholars to explore various new developments simultaneously. (This is the kind explanation. The more suspicious version states that the two seeds belong to different species, one conservative and the other progressive, which is the reason why they do not, nor should they be made to, interact much.)

Most of all, and here I return to my opening thought, I think the methodological virtue blindness of environmental ethicists is a result of the fact that the terms "virtue" and "vice" carry the stigma of sounding old-fashioned, preachy, and self-righteous. It is one thing to say, "We should respect nature!"; but it is another thing to reflect on this statement and happily conclude that one is uttering virtue language. Those of us who count themselves among the still largely countercultural activists who cultivate respect and love of nature in their daily lives—in other words, those who provide the practical base of environmental ethics—will more likely experience shock at this realization. (And vice versa, the theorists who have recently helped to revive interest in virtue ethics—i.e., those who would be made very happy by the realization that they too are, in fact, uttering virtue language—are generally not the ones who broadcast a personal interest in cultivating respect and love of nature.)

Instead, people who live ecologically responsible lives, and the academics who reflect on their lifestyles, tend to describe their ways of being and acting using the term "attitude." They typically coin phrases such as: "an attitude of humility,"⁹ or "a new attitude of caring for creation."¹⁰ Conversely, they reject our "aggressive attitude towards the natural world,"¹¹ and "anthropocentric and greedy attitudes."¹² Occasionally, the term "habit" is used. For example, Joanna Macy identifies the "habits of suppression" that keep us from being honest with our feelings and hence from experiencing compassion. Macy also revives the idea of "practice" (a traditional synonym for the cultivation of virtue), by which she means "fortifying the mind and schooling its attitudes."¹³

In all of these passages, the air is thick with a consciousness of life as an effort to grow from vice into virtue. Yet the terms "virtue" and "vice" themselves are conspicuously absent. I can only explain this widespread absence as the result of a certain stigma that must be attached to the *idea* of using virtue language. Listen again, for example, to Joanna Macy:

Please note: virtue is not required for the emergence of the ecological self! This shift in identification is essential to our survival at this point in our history precisely *because* it can serve in lieu of "ethics" and "morality." Moralizing is ineffective; sermons seldom hinder us from pursuing our self-interest as we construe it. Hence the need to be a little more enlightened about what our self-interest is.¹⁴

Had this stigma of preachiness not existed (Is Christian moralistic zeal to blame here?), and had popular ecoliterature used the labels "virtue" and "vice" as freely as it explores new "attitudes," then surely academics would have noticed sooner what riches lie within this discourse.

At any rate, it may be perplexing that the riches of ecological virtue language are not better known, but it is even more perplexing to contemplate how this language emerged, with such a profusion of variations, in such a short time, and despite the stigma attached to the *idea* of virtue language. Although I have no certain answer, I would like to offer some conjectures on this point.

One reason for the flourishing of ecological virtue language may simply be that this is how, at least in the West,¹⁵ we tend to talk when we are worried and would like to see things change. Virtue discourse, in Western languages, connotes a combination of intention and action that shows a seriousness about thorough and lasting change. It is the discourse we use when we are willing to make commitments and to express these publicly. (Think, for example, of the role of terms like "courage" and "loyalty" during wartime, or terms like "responsibility" and "caring" in the family values debate.) Since ecologically minded people tend to perceive the current environmental crisis

as extremely serious, it should not be surprising if they resort to those traditional linguistic constructions that connote active commitment, even if they do not call this language by its traditional name.

Second, I also believe that Lynn White's influential article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," has stimulated the use of virtue language among ecologically minded people. White, we may recall, argues that orthodox Christian doctrine has inspired harmful and arrogant "attitudes towards nature." As an antidote to this tradition of domination, and as the first step in a truly thoroughgoing social transformation, White recommends following St. Francis's "belief in the virtue of humility."¹⁶ In response to White's article, a heated debate ensued about Christianity's degree of guilt in contributing to the environmental crisis. Many Christians sought to rectify what they perceived as a misrepresentation of the concept of stewardship. Others, Christians as well as non-Christians, accepted the criticism and went on to explore alternatives. But critics and supporters in this great debate had one thing in common: Since White's thesis hinges on the necessity of a change of *attitude*, they focused their investigations and energies on *attitudes*. This development, I believe, significantly stimulated the use of ecological virtue language—and it may also have stimulated the use of the term "attitude" as a substitute for both "virtue" and "vice."

Still, neither of these conjectures seems to get to the heart of the matter. Linguistic traditions and fashionable topics of debate remain only external incentives for the development of a moral language. They may trigger trends, but they cannot fully account for the kind of proliferation and creativity we find in ecological virtue language. Such flourishing must ultimately be based on a good fit between a moral language and people's ways of experiencing and seeing the world.

Virtue language, in many ways, fits well with efforts to live out an ecological worldview.¹⁷ The cultivation of virtues allows and encourages us to integrate emotions, thoughts, and actions. Thus it fits with the ideal of personal wholeness that many ecologically minded people espouse. The cultivation of virtues depends on narratives, vision, and the power of examples. It does not require external commands or force. This fits with the preference of many ecologically minded people for change through conviction rather than coercion. And, as the many synonyms and closely related concepts in Appendix A illustrate, the cultivation of virtues provides rich expression to many different facets of human experience. This fits with an ecological appreciation for diversity. These may be some of the more substantive reasons explaining why ecologically minded people have discovered the language of virtue.

Whatever the reasons, however, the fact remains that ecological virtue language has emerged and is rapidly growing. In the remainder of this chapter

I will outline five features that characterize dirty virtue language. Obviously, the picture that will emerge is an interpretation, a vision that carries the stamp of my own interests and way of perceiving. Yet I like to think that the picture is not completely arbitrary, that others who pay attention to this emerging ecological virtue language would recognize similar features and patterns. (If not, at least we will have material for a good discussion!)

AN INTEGRAL DISCOURSE

Ecological virtue language represents a distinct moral discourse with an internal unity and logic—what I will call an integral discourse. This does not mean, of course, that it is entirely separate from other branches of moral discourse, particularly not other virtue discourses. The best way to understand ecological virtue language as an integral discourse is to see it as analogous to a bioregion, which has an integrity and unique character, but which connects with other bioregions and participates in the larger cycles of the biosphere.

What makes ecological virtue language an integral discourse? Not, as one might expect, the presence of a single undergirding ecological worldview, for we find quite a variety of ecological worldviews (see chapter 2). Rather, I would say that the integrity of ecological virtue language derives from its unique *practical* base in the environmental movement, a rootedness that is reflected in a particular moral vocabulary and its conventions. To describe this vocabulary and its accompanying conventions is the aim of this book, a task that cannot be summarized in a few paragraphs.

Intuitively, however, it is easy to grasp the distinctiveness and inner logic of ecological virtue language when one compares it to a moral discourse that has sprouted from a rather different practical base. Take, for example, the virtue language generated by Western corporate cultures. If one needs to make a profit in business, it generally helps to be “tough,” “efficient,” and “shrewd.”¹⁸ It may also help to be caring and trustworthy, but usually these traits are redefined as being, in fact, tough—that is, they produce “hard” results.¹⁹ Although the same combination of traits may aid in the achievement of environmental goals, ecologically minded people generally do not speak this way. First on their lips is not toughness but humility and sensitivity, not efficiency but sustainability, not shrewdness but wisdom. And caring is a basic way of being in the web of relations, not primarily a means to an end. Clearly, business practice and the practice of dedication to ecological well-being generate distinctive ways of using virtue language, each calibrated to the unique goals of the underlying practice.²⁰

At this point an objection may well be raised. Can one accurately characterize the environmental movement as a single practical base? Are there not so many internal groups, each with their own approach, often disagreeing

with each other, that the idea of a single practice giving rise to an integral moral discourse is no more than an artificial construct? One way to address this objection is to argue that, when push comes to shove, different environmental groups find themselves fighting for a common goal. In his book *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*, Bryan Norton defends the thesis that anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists converge at the practical level of environmental management. Norton bases his claim on the observation that “no long-term human values can be protected without protecting the context in which they evolved.”²¹ One also hears the related view that seemingly incompatible approaches, such as seeking legislative change and using illegal tactics of radical resistance, complement each other strategically: The radical vanguard tends to increase the popularity of the moderate reformers, thus speeding up the process of gaining popular support for environmental causes.

Yet not everyone is comfortable with such irenic interpretations of the practical scene. For example, some nonanthropocentrists are not convinced that anthropocentrists go far enough in their efforts at species protection.²² And some ecofeminists resist the idea that deep ecology can adequately subsume their practical concerns and the concerns of other justice-oriented ecologists.²³ As Don Marietta points out, the emphasis on differences may be a matter of principle:

Insistence on a unifying principle is seen [by some feminists] as causing the rejection of the voices of oppressed people. There is no clear denial of the possibility of there being a unifying principle yet to be discovered, but there is strong resistance to making this search the goal of ethical inquiry.²⁴

I very much resonate with these concerns. Therefore, I do not want to belabor too much the question of whether ecological virtue language is an integral discourse rooted in a distinct practice. Yet I do think that the sheer existence of debates and practical disagreements between ecologically minded people shows that there is a degree of common ground, an ecological culture, *which makes disagreement meaningful*. This point is underscored by the practical fact that these debates take place in shared forums such as journals and conferences.

As an integral discourse, ecological virtue language has a distinct vocabulary and operates according to a discrete set of conventions, just as a bioregion displays a distinct flora and fauna bound together by custom-made patterns of interaction. Thus certain virtues and vices occur across the board in environmental literature, typifying as it were the moral landscape.²⁵ For example, “respect for nature” is a commonly used expression. Different authors might mean somewhat different things by it, of course, but the expression

seems to be universally accepted and used. The same applies to the virtues of adaptability, benevolence, care, compassion or solidarity, connectedness, creativity, cooperation, fostering, friendship, frugality, gratitude, healing, hope, inclusivity, joy, justice, moderation or restraint, openness, passionateness, perseverance, realism, self-examination, sensuousness, sharing, spontaneity, vulnerability, wisdom, and wonder. As for vices, ecological discourse is typified by terms such as anthropocentrism, arrogance, carelessness, competitiveness, consumerism or greed, contempt, cruelty, denial, despair, domination or mastery, dualistic thinking, elitism, exploitation, (inexcusable) ignorance or thoughtlessness, indifference, insensitivity, manipulation, pride, otherworldliness, reductionism, romanticism, and wastefulness.

Clearly, not all of these terms are unique to ecological virtue discourse, just as not all the plants and animals that typify a bioregion are unique to it. It is the particular combination of terms, as well as the distinctive ways in which these terms are interpreted and related to each other, that makes for a unique, integral moral discourse.

A DIVERSE DISCOURSE

Having highlighted the integral character of ecological virtue language, I also want to highlight its internal diversity. By this I do not so much mean to say that we find here a highly diversified set of virtues and vices (though that is the case, as one can see from Appendix A), but rather that no two ecologically minded people speak and write in exactly the same way. To some extent the presence of such diversity is unremarkable, because variation occurs between the speakers of any language. Yet differences in virtue discourse can betray differences in the worldviews, backgrounds, and characters of ecowriters. Such variations are significant and must be highlighted if we are to honor and safeguard the inclusivity of ecological moral discourse.

For one thing, different authors employ different configurations of virtues and vices. One could say that their *catalogues* differ, as long as one remembers that these catalogues are never completely spelled out. Occasionally an author will even go so far as to exclude explicitly a virtue or vice that others deliberately include. The next two chapters, which contain catalogues based on the work of Murray Bookchin and Thomas Berry, illustrate the level of variety on this point.

Diversity also shows up in the form of different emphases. What may be a particularly important attitude to one author may be of little interest or even objectionable to another. To use a traditional expression: Different authors may identify different cardinal virtues. For example, poet and essayist Linda Hogan writes: "Caretaking is the utmost spiritual and physical responsibility of our time, and perhaps that stewardship is finally our place in the web of

life, our work, the solution to the mystery of what we are.”²⁶ Yet ecofeminist Elizabeth Dodson Gray finds such a view of stewardly care presumptuous, since “we still in our gut feel we’re above and we do not have to fit in.” Gray suggests that the key attitude we must cultivate is rather attunement:

That means you’ve got to listen. It’s like what I consider good parenting to be—cybernetic. It means being guided by information feedback: you do one thing tentatively and you wait to see what happens. You monitor it very carefully (which we do not bother to do). If it looks like it’s not doing well, you pull back and you change your behavior, trying something else. Attunement means listening, it means adapting yourself. It means fitting in. And it will never be done by us as a culture unless we, as a culture, realize we are not above.²⁷

Not surprisingly, as these examples illustrate, disagreements about key moral attitudes tend to parallel more basic differences within ecological thought, such as the difference between hierarchical and radically nonanthropocentric theories.

Generally, diversity in the area of cardinal virtues is not a topic of explicit debate. Yet one can identify variations between authors by comparing which virtues receive the most emphasis or turn up most frequently in their works. For example, the most-discussed virtue in Wendell Berry’s *A Continuous Harmony* is discipline: We need discipline in focusing on details on the farm, in mending our ways for the sake of conservation, in carefully determining proper means to a desired end, in exercising self-criticism, and so on.²⁸ By contrast, discipline only turns up once (as the discipline of prayer needed for ecological sensitivity) in Sean McDonagh’s *To Care for the Earth*, despite the author’s Roman Catholic heritage. This is not to say that these authors entirely diverge on what are the most crucial virtues in an ecological age. Both Berry and McDonagh often stress care, love, and respect or reverence. Still, the example of discipline reminds us that in speaking about dirty virtue language, we must remember that what is cardinal to one ecologically minded person may be minor to another.

Similarly, what may be a particularly worrisome vice to one author may seem like a small or misplaced concern to another. To use a traditional expression again, different authors may identify different capital vices. *Hubris* (pride), for example, is an important vice in James Nash’s *Loving Nature*. It expresses itself in human attempts to “play God” in relation to nature.²⁹ In ecofeminist literature, one rarely finds this orthodox theological term, whereas psychological and sociological terms like “alienation,” “control,” “domination,” and “denial” resound like a familiar refrain. In a few extreme cases of variation, what is a most serious vice to one author represents a great good to another. Ecofeminists Marti Kheel and Chaia Heller, for example, argue that

calls to “save” and “protect” nature are very harmful, since they diminish and objectify the nonhuman world. Rather than such hierarchical, heroic attitudes, we need holistic virtues of allied resistance and attentive care.³⁰ Yet saving and protecting are exactly the watchwords of popular environmentalism. “Save the Whales!” and “Protect the Forests!” are battle cries we have all heard (or seen on bumper stickers).

Diversity also shows up when particular virtues and vices are interpreted differently. John F. Haught, for example, highlights variations in the meanings of environmental abuse and care for nature. He correlates the variations with different theological visions:

In the sacramental view we condemn environmental abuse because it is a sacrilege. But in the eschatological perspective the sin of environmental abuse is one of despair. To destroy nature is to turn away from a promise. What makes nature deserve our care is not that it is divine but that it is pregnant with a mysterious future.³¹

To find such an explicit articulation of diverse interpretations within ecological virtue language is actually rare. Most variations still remain to be uncovered. The question of whether there are recognizable patterns of variety, patterns that might be correlated with distinct branches of the environmental movement, contains much unexplored promise.

Finally, I want to highlight the diverse ways in which virtues and vices can be causally linked. Christian animal rights activist Andrew Linzey, for example, attributes our dominant abuse of animals to spiritual immaturity, which he interprets as a lack of Christian theocentrism.³² Yet ecofeminist animal rights activist Lori Gruen sees Judeo-Christian religious belief exactly as *causing* our instrumentalist use of animals, since it would encourage the view of animals (and women) as “others” to be used, and even sacrificed.³³ On the virtue side, mainstream Christian authors typically argue that respect for nature follows from faith in a transcendent Creator.³⁴ By contrast, deep ecologists trace our capacity for respect to the virtue of identification with the larger Self of the natural world. Causal relationships between vices and between virtues have long been of interest to ethicists and theologians, since these relationships affect our ability to change harmful habits and cultivate helpful ones. The diversity of relationships that emerges from ecoliterature calls for renewed reflection on this topic.

Differences between catalogues, cardinal virtues, capital vices, and causal relationships indicate that ecological virtue discourse is a lived language that has neither been logically constructed nor psychologically tested. In its current multifaceted form, we can treasure it as a discursive correlate of the diversity we find in the natural world, a diversity that carries with it the potential for creativity and regeneration. Still, a degree of systematic reflection

on this lived language is needed to help distinguish between mere messiness and variations that are pregnant with significance and moral promise.

A DIALECTICAL DISCOURSE

The diverse ways in which different ecowriters use virtue discourse serve as a reminder that we must not too hastily draw general conclusions about this moral language. Nevertheless, we may notice patterns that, with appropriate reservation, help us understand the structure of ecological virtue discourse. In this section I will highlight a pattern of logical and psychological tensions. To the extent that these tensions are deliberate and produce desirable results that cannot be achieved otherwise, ecological virtue language can be called a dialectical discourse.

Not all tensions are deliberate, however. Some represent the kinds of inconsistencies one can expect to find in an ethic that is still in its infancy. For example, I am puzzled when I read the following:

Love is respect's strongest foundation, although it is often difficult to uncover because of our own desires and fears. Nevertheless, seeing value in another regardless of his/her/its utility to us is a crucial first step towards discovering that love. Without respect we cannot love.³⁵

In this passage I first read that love is the foundation for respect, but then I learn that the opposite is the case: Respect is a necessary condition for love. Such convoluted thinking (unless it is an intentional exploration of circularity) can only confuse those who are genuinely interested in cultivating these virtues.³⁶ Inconsistencies of this kind will need to be straightened out in the interest of moral clarity.

Other tensions within ecological virtue discourse seem to be deliberately maintained in the interest of securing a delicate balance of characteristics. Take, for example, the virtues of earthiness and attunement, both widely valued in ecoliterature. Each points us in a different direction. Earthiness demands practicality, a no-nonsense attitude, even a degree of bluntness. All of this is necessary if we are serious about offering down-to-earth solutions to urgent problems. Attunement, however, requires an opening up of all our senses to the greatest degree of sensibility. It demands gentleness, a dwelling on details, and personal vulnerability. One could say that as virtues, earthiness and attunement want different things for our hearts. Earthiness encourages a certain hardening of our hearts for the sake of justice; attunement encourages a softening of our hearts for the sake of love. Yet both are necessary to keep our hearts in the right place. If earthiness is not balanced by a tuning in to the other, it may turn into a crude form of instrumental reasoning that inflicts unnecessary harm. If attunement is not balanced by earthy

commitment to justice, it may turn into a form of nature-romanticism that provides an escape, but not an ethic (and hence confirmation of the status quo). The tension between these ecological virtues is needed to avoid extremes that could lead ecologically minded people in dangerous directions.

Thus, whereas some tensions reflect the infancy of ecological virtue discourse and must be straightened out in due time, others reflect a dialectical richness that ensures flexibility and prevents harmful extremes. This feature challenges us to take another look at the Aristotelian image of a virtue as a mean between extremes of excess and deficiency. While ecological virtue discourse seems geared to avoid extremes as well, it does so in an innovatively relational way. We need not always rely on individual virtues to achieve balance. We can rely on a *network of virtue relations*. This view of the life of virtue nicely corresponds with the general emphasis in ecoliterature on relational or holistic modes of thinking, acting, and being.

A DYNAMIC DISCOURSE

As a diverse and dialectical discourse, ecological virtue language is obviously hard to pin down. The fact that it is also a dynamic discourse further underscores the futility of such an effort. Ecological virtue language is *emerging*; its shape is not fixed, nor is it likely to become fixed in the near future. To some extent this dynamism can be attributed to the newness of the discourse, which has not yet settled or come to full fruition. But dynamism also belongs to ecological virtue discourse as an integral feature, since this discourse is connected with various evolving realities. Here we discover another recognizable pattern.

One connection involves the natural sciences. New insights from the natural sciences require constant reexamination of basic moral assumptions. For instance, recent discoveries about the importance of symbiosis in biological evolution have given rise to speculation about a possible natural basis for relational virtues such as cooperation, benevolence, and care.³⁷ Such a natural basis would imply that the life of virtue is less a matter of exercising control (a notion that had drawn support from the prior emphasis on competition in biology) and more a matter of fostering spontaneity. In fact, in a significant move away from established control-centered traditions, ecologically minded authors rarely portray the cultivation of virtues in terms of mastering unruly impulses.³⁸ Searching for a moral language that suits new biological (and psychological) emphases, they stress the need for a vulnerability that gives basic instincts a chance to be expressed. Their search in this key area, which cuts to the core of the moral life, illustrates how the connection between scientific discourse and ecological virtue language introduces a dynamism with far-reaching consequences.

Another source of dynamism is our changing understanding of the possibilities of human and nonhuman existence on this planet. When we still believed that the Earth could, with the right technology, produce enough food for all people, our moral focus was on technological creativity, redistribution, and development. Virtues like simplicity and responsibility predominated in environmental discourse (this ethic was primarily addressed to rich elites). Now that many of us can no longer support this belief, and now that we are developing a greater interest in the plight of nonhuman life as well, our moral focus is shifting to the challenges of fashioning integrated forms of existence. As a result, virtues like humility, vulnerability, and feeling kinship are becoming increasingly prevalent in ecoliterature. Clearly, such dynamism is necessary if our cultivation of virtues is to be attuned to realistic possibilities in an ecological age. Lack of such attunement could lead us to embrace “virtues” that, despite our good intentions, undercut rather than follow the options that are still open.

Because ecological virtue language has to be dynamic, it is unlikely that this discourse will ever become systematized to the extent that, for example, Thomas Aquinas systematized Christian virtue language. Ecowriters appreciate the ever changing and multifaceted structures of the world, an appreciation that contradicts efforts to build a closed intellectual system with strong claims to ultimacy. In fact, an ecological virtue theory that claimed to be *the* virtue theory would constitute an oxymoron.

It is one thing to value dynamism and quite another to engage in intellectual sloppiness. Insofar as ecological virtue discourse is still a new moral language, there is much room and need for development, for aiming at greater precision of expression, for better understanding conceptual connections and distinctions. As of yet, while the literature contains many virtues and vices, few have been thoroughly interpreted. And conversely, while some traditional virtues and vices receive no mention at all, the reasons for this silence are usually not spelled out, so that the reader is left to wonder whether the omission expresses the author’s disapproval or rather the opposite, automatic acceptance. (The virtue of cleanliness, for example, comes to mind here.) Efforts to address these and other instances of incompleteness need not undercut the dynamism of ecological virtue ethics, as long as they flow from a desire to achieve greater moral clarity rather than from a desire to build the ultimate intellectual system.

A VISIONARY DISCOURSE WITHOUT A SOCIAL ETHIC

By expressing themselves through dirty virtue language, ecologically minded people express an interest in the cultivation and transformation of their own and other people’s characters. Yet unlike Aristotle and many of his followers,

ecologically minded people are not interested in character development for the sake of achieving personal harmony within an existing social system. Rather, their dirty virtues are tied to a social vision for the future, a vision of ecologically sustainable societies. The change from present social structures to ecological societies is seen as necessary for the survival of diverse life-forms on Earth. And, in the viewpoint of many, the cultivation of appropriate attitudes can foster such change.³⁹

Ecological virtue discourse thus derives much of its impetus from a social ideal. Ironically, however, most ecological virtue language does not display the features of a social ethic. Calls to respect nature, to change our dominating attitudes, to be frugal, careful, and wise tend to remain just that: calls. Usually they are not followed by a detailed analysis of how heeding them will bring about the desired social change. Although much ecoliterature does address legal, communal, and institutional changes required to build sustainable societies, virtue discourse is rarely an explicitly integrated part of these specific discussions. Even if a single work contains much virtue language as well as a theory of social change, the two aspects tend to be in different chapters or sections of chapters. Thus we are confronted with the irony that the language of dirty virtues witnesses to a social vision without being connected to a social ethic.

Again, I believe Lynn White's article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," was instrumental in setting this pattern of "a social vision without a social ethic." White's thesis that attitudes must change if we are to avert further ecological disaster provides a clear image of ordered social progression, which puts a vice-to-virtue transformation at the start. At the end of the progression we find a vision, inspired by the teachings of St. Francis, of a harmonious, radically inclusive and egalitarian world. Yet White does not indicate what, if anything, beyond the vice-to-virtue transformation would be necessary to get to this better world. His silence on this point was transmitted to the widespread debates that followed the publication of his articles, debates about the core questions of the causes behind and possible solutions to the ecological crisis. Although virtue language flourishes profusely in these debates, social analysis is often thinly represented or totally absent and the listener is expected to simply go along with the assumption that all will pan out as long as we change our basic attitudes (there are exceptions, most notably the work of social ecologists and of many ecofeminists).⁴⁰ The end result is the curious phenomenon of a discourse committed to social change without a developed theory of social change.

In my view, this phenomenon calls for critical reflection. I see the current situation as somewhat analogous to the case of the earliest Christians, who were energized by a vision of social transformation through the coming of God's Kingdom, who fervently called for people to practice virtues such as

neighborly love, peacefulness, and long-suffering, but who did not develop a social ethic.⁴¹ Hence the early churches did not present a real challenge to reigning powers or to practices such as war and slavery. Yet the history of Christianity also provides a different model. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Social Gospel Movement responded to widespread social problems by enriching early Christian eschatological teachings with the insights of contemporary social analysis (at that time especially socialist theory). By so doing the movement was empowered to bring about widespread changes, including legislative changes that ended the exploitation of child labor and limited the workweek to six days. A similar move could now provide more bite to the commitment to social change that characterizes ecological virtue language.⁴² In effect, this means that this discourse needs to become more integrated with those sections of environmental literature where we do find the development of a social ethic.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Ecological virtue discourse, as a distinct, diverse, dialectical, dynamic, and visionary moral language, deserves more attention than it has received so far. Many riches hide among the dirty virtues, as well as significant challenges to ancient traditions. While these facts may be sufficient to warrant academic interest, there should be a practical benefit as well. Rich moral discourse, rooted in transformative praxis, carries the promise of moral creativity. We are sorely in need of such creativity as we face the many ecological challenges ahead and as we increasingly find ourselves perplexed by the difficulties involved in adapting traditional moral languages to the needs of our age. One more language is one more chance. It would border on irresponsibility not to pay attention to the virtue discourse that emerges from the environmental movement.

In fact, with this new virtue language we may not just be given another chance, but even a *good* chance at achieving moral breakthroughs, at finding fresh ways of looking at problems and dilemmas that are already getting stale (such as the question whether trees or rivers have rights). Virtue language has premodern roots, and although it comes to us sifted through the mazes of modernity, its internal consistency and comprehensibility are not dependent on the worldview that came into power with the scientific and industrial revolutions. Given that many critics see the modern worldview as an important factor in bringing about the ecological crisis, it will be helpful to have access to a form of moral discourse that is not too much in cahoots with this worldview. Even though virtue ethics may have acquired an image of conservatism, a virtue ethic based in the lived discourse of the environmental movement could have surprisingly radical effects.

NOTES

1. Marti Kheel, "From Heroic to Holistic Ethics: The Ecofeminist Challenge," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 261.
2. Anthony Weston, *Back to Earth: Tomorrow's Environmentalism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 58.
3. Lester R. Brown, *Building a Sustainable Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), 354.
4. Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 28.
5. Stephanie Lahar, "Roots: Rejoining Natural and Social History," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, and Nature*, ed. Gaard, 111.
6. See Geoffrey B. Frasz, "Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993), 259–74; Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
7. Only a handful of ecological writers have deliberately called for, developed, or explored virtue-based approaches, often in response to what are perceived as more mainstream approaches. See Thomas E. Hill, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (Fall 1983), 211–24; Eugene C. Hargrove, "The Role of Rules in Ethical Decision Making," *Inquiry* 28 (1985), 3–42; Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), esp. 198–218; Jay B. McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), esp. 73–4; Plumwood, *Feminism*; Frasz, "Environmental Virtue Ethics," 259–74; Ron Erickson, "Comment on Environmental Virtue Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994), 334–6; James A. Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991); John Patterson, "Maori Environmental Virtues," *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994), 397–409; Laura Westra, *An Environmental Proposal for Ethics: The Principle of Integrity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994); Jamie Schaefer, "Ethical Implications of Applying Aquinas's Notions of the Unity and Diversity of Creation to Human Functioning in Ecosystems" (Marquette University: Ph.D dissertation, 1994); Pamela A. Smith, "Aquinas and Today's Environmental Ethics: An Exploration of How the Vision and the Virtue Ethic of 'Ecothomism' Might Inform a Viable Eco-Ethic" (Dusquesne University: Ph.D. dissertation, 1995); Deborah D. Blake, "Toward a Sustainable Ethic: Virtue and the Environment," in *And God Saw That It Was Good*, eds. Drew Christiansen, S.J., and Walter Grazer (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 197–210; and Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 121–3, 314–7 (I have not been able to consider the 1996 publications in my book, due to the logistics of publishing).
8. Plumwood, *Feminism*, 173.
9. David G. Hallman, *A Place in Creation: Ecological Visions in Science, Religion, and Economics* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992), 27.
10. Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1986), 49.
11. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 5.
12. Bill Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1988), 186.
13. Joanna Macy, "Faith, Power, and Ecology," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996), 417, 421.

14. Joanna Macy, "Awakening to the Ecological Self," in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1989), 209. In this passage Macy elaborates on Arne Naess's criticism of the traditional notion of altruism.
15. Ecological virtue language also appears in non-Western texts. One thinks, for example, of the role of *ahimsa* and benevolence in Buddhist environmental literature. However, my expertise does not extend to these areas. I do hope that in the future comparative studies will be carried out.
16. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967), 1206, 1207.
17. For a description of the cluster of worldviews that can be designated as "ecological," see chapter 2.
18. On toughness as a business virtue, see Robert Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 213–6.
19. See Louke M. van Wensveen, "Is Toughness a Business Virtue?" *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* (Winter/Spring 1995), 15–25.
20. I do not mean to imply here that either the corporate world or the environmental movement has a single goal or set of goals that is uniformly interpreted and accepted. I am thinking rather of two nodes of conglomerate goal-oriented behavior where each aggregate of goals is sufficiently distinctive to yield an identifiable practice and matching moral discourse.
21. Bryan Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 240.
22. Brian K. Stevenson, for example, criticizes Norton's model for not accommodating nonanthropocentrist requirements for species protection ("Contextualism and Norton's Convergence Hypothesis," *Environmental Ethics* 17 [1995], 135–50).
23. See Deborah Slicer, "Is There an Ecofeminism—Deep Ecology 'Debate'?" *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995), 151–69.
24. Don E. Marietta, Jr., "Pluralism in Environmental Ethics," *Topoi* 12 (1993), 70.
25. I make these claims very hesitatingly, since I am wary of attempts to seek or construct a unified environmental ethic. My observation that ecological virtue language (still) forms a single discourse represents what I see as the most fitting interpretation of my findings; it does not represent a program. My own position of pluralism resembles Don Marietta's statement above.
26. Linda Hogan, "The Kill Hole," in *This Sacred Earth*, ed. Gottlieb, 40.
27. Elizabeth Dodson Gray, "A Critique of Dominion Theology," in *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, Ecology, and Justice*, ed. Dieter Hessel (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1985), 80.
28. Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970, 1972), 53, 81, 86, 108.
29. Nash, *Loving Nature*, 104.
30. Chaia Heller, "For the Love of Nature: Ecology and the Cult of the Romantic," in *Ecofeminism*, ed. Gaard, 235; and Kheel, "From Heroic to Holistic Ethics," *ibid.*, 248.
31. John F. Haught, *The Promise of Nature* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 110.
32. Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 15ff.
33. Lori Gruen, "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Gaard, 64.

34. See, for example, Nash, *Loving Nature*, 100.
35. Gus diZerega, "Individuality, Human and Natural Communities, and the Foundation of Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995), 37.
36. There may be instances, of course, in which two or more virtues need to be cultivated simultaneously because they depend on each other. Perhaps the author of the above passage would say this is the case for love and respect also. Yet in that case it is important to clarify how such simultaneous cultivation can be achieved.
37. Many ecological authors, especially ecofeminists, in fact already treat the natural basis of these virtues as a given. Cf. "Our children need to be sustained in their natural empathy with and compassion for animals" ("Liberating Life: A Report to the World Council of Churches," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990], 287).
38. For a critique of "ethics as restraint," see Kheel, "From Heroic to Holistic Ethics."
39. Not all hold this view, however. Christopher Stone, for example, writes: "If the world is going to be changed, it is going to be changed by people who can get past talking up a reform of the human spirit and lessons to be learned from Buddhism, and put in the effort required to understand fisheries quotas, pollution taxes, trade barriers, and what the International Court of Justice can and cannot do" (*The Gnat Is Older Than Man: Global Environment and Human Agenda* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], xiv).
40. Many ecofeminists draw on general feminist social theory. Analytical concepts such as patriarchy, oppression, and ideology play an important role in their work.
41. See J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 30.
42. Such a move would also benefit the development of virtue theory in general, much of which fails to deal with larger questions of social change.
43. One promising step in this direction can be found in Max Oelschlaeger's book *Caring for Creation*. Oelschlaeger sees the virtue of caring for creation as a metaphor embedded in various religious narratives. Such narratives are crucial for social change in democratic societies, he argues, since they inspire discourse on the public good and they challenge the idea that the state as such is already moral. Although social change requires more than religious narratives (i.e., "politically coordinated, scientifically informed, and institutionally empowered actions that are consistent with our basic democratic freedoms and diversity of ultimate commitments"), Oelschlaeger's narrative ethic explicitly integrates the dynamics of social change with the cultivation of virtue (*Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994], 10, 76-7).

Elsewhere, Oelschlaeger (with Michael Bruner) also argues for the importance of rhetoric in bringing about social change ("Rhetoric, Environmentalism, and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 16 [1994], 377-96). Since virtue discourse is highly suitable for rhetorical purposes, this argument could also be used to construct a theory of the role of virtue in social transformation.