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Towards an Adequate Environmental Virtue Ethic

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ABSTRACT

In this article I consider four concerns regarding the possibility of an environmental virtue ethic functioning as an alternative – rather than a supplement – to more conventional approaches to environmental ethics. The concerns are: (1) it is not possible to provide an objective specification of environmental virtue, (2) an environmental virtue ethic will lack the resources to provide critique of obtaining cultural practices and policies, (3) an environmental virtue ethic will not provide sufficient action-guidance, (4) an environmental virtue ethic cannot ground constraints on human activities regarding the natural environment. Each of these concerns makes a claim about the poverty of normative resources at the disposal of environmental virtue ethics. I defend a conception of environmental virtue – as a character virtue with the same normative standing as the conventional personal and interpersonal virtues – that enables an environmental virtue ethic with the wherewithal to address each of the concerns.

KEYWORDS

Virtue ethics, normativity, ecological sensitivity

Philosophical discourse about environmental virtue began in earnest when Thomas Hill asked philosophers to think about what kind of person would wantonly pave a patch of unimpeding natural landscape.¹ Hill suggested that such behaviour or ‘even [seeing nature’s] value solely in cost/benefit terms’² betrays the absence of traits that are the natural facilitators for developing proper humility and appreciation. Embedded in Hill’s argument, at least as it is commonly understood, is a defence of a set of traits characteristic of persons who are environmentally virtuous. Over the last two decades environmental philosophers have expanded on Hill’s account by defending additional traits and refining their predecessors’

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proposals in an attempt to provide a full accounting of the environmentally virtuous person. Many of these philosophers have taken an extensionist approach to specifying environmental virtue. They begin with a character disposition considered to be a virtue in interpersonal interactions or relationships and argue that the disposition ought, *mutatis mutandis*, to be operative in environmental interactions or relationships as well. Implicit in this approach is a conception of environmental virtue as constituted by the conventional interpersonal virtues appropriately situated in ecological context. In this article I defend an alternative, non-extensionist, methodology for specifying environmental virtue and a correspondingly different conception of environmental virtue. On this conception environmental virtue is a distinct human virtue with the same normative status as the conventional personal and interpersonal virtues. This conception enables an environmental virtue ethic with greater normative resources than does the conception implicit in extensionist accounts. This is significant for the prospect of an environmental virtue ethic functioning as an alternative (rather than a supplement) to traditional approaches to environmental ethics.

There are two central issues regarding environmental virtue ethics: specifying the attitudes and dispositions constitutive of environmental virtue (and vice) and identifying the appropriate role of environmental virtue (and vice) in an environmental ethic.³ As indicated above, most of the work on environmental virtue ethics has focused on the former, whereas the central project in this article concerns the latter. My aim is to articulate a particular conception of environmental virtue and indicate how that conception might enable a distinctively virtue ethics approach to environmental ethics. So although I will argue that there is a uniquely environmental virtue (which I will call ecological sensitivity), the claims that I make regarding its substantive content are largely preliminary and provisional, made to enable the central project of the article to go forward. I leave for another time the project of specifying the particular character dispositions that constitute it.

ADEQUATE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

There is general agreement among environmental ethicists that an adequate environmental ethic will provide a theoretical platform for promoting sustainable practices, policies and lifestyles. There is, however, considerable disagreement regarding what is required to meet this general adequacy condition. Some – most notably those who favour a pragmatic approach to environmental problems⁴, but also some who favour enlightened anthropocentric or enlightened self-interested approaches⁵ – have stressed the practical aspects of the condition. An environmental ethic, they argue, must prove efficacious in promoting solutions to real-world environmental problems. Others – most notably those who favour an intrinsic value approach⁶ – have emphasised its theoretical dimensions. An

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environmental ethic, they argue, must not be susceptible to pressures that could result in its endorsing environmentally unsustainable practices, policies, or lifestyles. This divergence has manifested itself in a series of ongoing critiques and rejoinders between pragmatists and intrinsic value theorists.⁷ But mutual charges of inadequacy aside, the content of the exchange makes a strong case that there are both theoretical and practical conditions that an adequate environmental ethic must meet. An adequate environmental ethic must:

- (1) Provide a theoretical platform for reliable, sustained and justified critique of environmentally unsustainable practices, policies and lifestyles.
- (2) Provide action-guidance – i.e., recommend a course of action – in concrete situations regarding individual or communal interactions or relationships with the natural environment.
- (3) Provide arguments, reasons, and/or justification that are efficacious in moving people to adopt or implement the solutions that are recommended.

The first and second of these conditions are theoretical, the third is practical, and they are all three offered here as necessary conditions for an adequate environmental ethic. It is a common view among environmental ethicists, even among those who have done significant work on environmental virtue⁸, that a virtue ethics approach to environmental ethics will have difficulty meeting these conditions. This estimation is underwritten by two familiar concerns regarding the normative resources of virtue ethics generally: (1) that virtue ethics are unable to provide an objective specification of the character dispositions that they consider to be virtues, and (2) that virtue ethics, even after they have provided an account of the virtues and the kind of person one should be, are unable to provide action-guidance in concrete situations. These concerns, particularised to the prospect of employing a virtue ethics framework (as opposed to a consequentialist, rights-based, intuitionist or pragmatic framework) for an environmental ethic, give rise to the following worries.

- (1) It is not possible to provide an objective specification of environmental virtue.
- (2) An environmental virtue ethic will lack the resources to provide sustained and justified critique of obtaining cultural practices and policies.
- (3) An environmental virtue ethic will not provide sufficient action-guidance.
- (4) An environmental virtue ethic cannot ground constraints on human activities regarding the non-human natural environment.

The tendency of environmental ethicists to believe that environmental virtue ethics will fail in one or more of these respects is a result of their conception of what environmental virtue is. In the next section I make this conception explicit, and describe an alternative to it. The alternative promises to provide

for an environmental virtue ethic with the normative resources to address each of the above concerns.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE

As indicated in the introduction, extensionism has been the favoured approach of environmental ethicists to the specification of environmental virtue.⁹ Geoffrey Frasz, for example, defends friendship with the land as an environmental virtue on the grounds that one's relationship with the land can provide mutual enrichment and benefits analogous to those attending healthy interpersonal friendships. Natural communities and ecosystems, he argues, have intrinsic value and interests in the same sense that humans do,¹⁰ and 'one can gain more in the long run for one's life by being a friend to the natural world than by merely focusing on the short-term gains one can selfishly attain.'¹¹ So just as one ought to cultivate friendship with other persons, one ought to cultivate friendship with the land. Jennifer Welchman, to take another example, employs the extensionist approach in her defence of benevolence and loyalty as environmental virtues.¹² An environmentally virtuous person, she argues, will be a capable and constant steward of nature, and the character traits that make for a competent steward of nature are the same as those that make for a competent steward in anthropic matters.¹³ Principal among these are benevolence and loyalty, so benevolence and loyalty are environmental virtues. It is indicative of the ubiquity of the extensionist approach that both Frasz and Welchman employ the extensionist strategy even while they accept contrary conceptions of what can function as an adequate environmental ethic. Welchman is concerned to develop what she calls 'enlightened anthropocentrism', whereas Frasz is committed to developing a nonanthropocentric ethic.

The general argumentative strategy of extensionists, exemplified in the work of Frasz and Welchman, is as follows: (1) V1 is the virtue applicable to anthropic interactions or relationships of type H1. (2) Naturalistic interactions or relationships of type E1 are analogous in all morally relevant respects to H1, where 'morally relevant' in this context refers to those features of the interaction or relationship that renders the particular virtue appropriate to it. (3) Therefore, V1 should be applied, *mutatis mutandis* to E1. That is, V1 is a component of environmental virtue, and the environmentally virtuous person will display the character disposition V1 in E1.

Implicit in this methodology is a particular conception of environmental virtue (as opposed to a particular substantive account of environmental virtue). On this conception a character disposition that is normative for any human interaction with the natural environment is a constituent of environmental virtue (or one of several environmental virtues), and environmental virtue just is the aggregate or compilation of the virtues applicable to environmental interactions.

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Compassion, for example, is normative in cases where one's decisions or actions have likely implications for the pain and suffering (or lack thereof) of non-human animals, therefore, compassion is a constituent of environmental virtue. On this conception it makes perfect sense to talk about loyalty and friendship as components of environmental virtue. If one has the right kind of history – one in which mutual trust and enrichment have been cultivated – with some part of the natural environment – a coyote, a stand of trees, or a stretch of river perhaps – then one ought to be loyal and a friend to it.¹⁴

There is, however, an alternative conception of environmental virtue according to which it is a discrete virtue applicable to all and only environmental interactions and relationships. On this conception environmental virtue is not a compilation of those virtues operative in some environmental interaction – it is not a type of loyalty, compassion, temperance, and so on. It is instead a virtue endemic and peculiar to environmental interactions and relationships. It is the human excellence whose domain is environmental interactions and relationships just as, for example, compassion is the virtue – the human excellence – whose domain is situations where one's actions or decisions are likely to have implications for the suffering (or lack thereof) of others. On this conception, then, environmental virtue is a virtue distinct from and on normative par with the personal or interpersonal character virtues.¹⁵ Environmental virtue need not be the only virtue operative in environmental interactions – compassion, loyalty, friendship, and other virtues will often be properly operative as well – but one should exhibit environmental virtue in all one's environmental interactions.

To present an alternative conception of environmental virtue is not, however, to argue that there actually is a human excellence that fulfils it. In the next section I argue that there is indeed a human excellence – I call it *ecological sensitivity* – that fits this conception of environmental virtue.

ECOLOGICAL SENSITIVITY AS A DISTINCT CHARACTER VIRTUE

The conception of environmental virtue that I have suggested is an Aristotelian one. To possess a virtue according to Aristotle is to possess excellence in a characteristic function or activity of members of one's kind.¹⁶ So, with one significant modification – that by 'characteristic' I do not mean 'distinctive of members of a kind' but rather 'common to members of a kind' – let us, following Aristotle, say that if x (an individual) is an F (a kind), then the virtue of x as an F is the state of x that makes x a good F . And as the characteristic activities or functions of F s increase, virtues for members of F likewise increase. So if x is an F and F s have characteristic activities A_1, \dots, A_n , then V_1 of x as an F is the state that makes x excellent in A_1, \dots, V_n of x as an F is the state that makes x excellent in A_n . Aristotle famously defined excellence in a particular area of human activity as the mean between deficiency and excess in that area. One need not, however,

embrace Aristotle's doctrine of the mean to accept this more general account. Nor need one accept Aristotle's problematic *ergon* argument. The *ergon* argument seeks to establish a particular human activity as the characteristic human function. It is therefore subsequent to this general account.

I call this account general because it applies equally to the excellences of knives, horses, eyes, and men. Our present concern, however, are virtues specific to moral agents or virtues concerned with deliberative action. So, again following Aristotle, let virtues distinguished by their being states that decide regarding actions, defined by proper reason, be called *character virtues*.¹⁷ We have, then, the following individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for there being a character virtue. For there to be a character virtue for members of a particular kind requires: (1) that there is a characteristic function or activity for members of that kind, (2) that members of the kind have some state that decides relative to performance of that characteristic function or activity, (3) that there is a range of states that decide (i.e., dispositions) that members of the kind might have towards the characteristic function or activity, (4) that the constituents of that range admit rational assessment, i.e., are more or less defensible. Moreover, the number of character virtues for members of the kind will maintain a one-to-one correspondence with the number of characteristic functions or activities of members of the kind that meet conditions (2), (3), and (4).¹⁸

If there is an environmental virtue, then, it must be the case that (1*) it is a characteristic feature of the life of a human being that they deal in matters concerning the natural environment, (2*) human beings have a state that decides relative to their interactions with the natural environment, (3*) there is a range of states that decide that human beings might have regarding the natural environment, and (4*) members of that range can be assessed as more or less justified.

It would be difficult to deny that human beings characteristically interact with and impress the natural environment. Environmental ethicists at one time wrote as if nature was something that we encountered only when we left our homes for the countryside or the national parks. Now, however, urban environmentalism and environmental justice feature prominently in environmental discourse, and there is widespread awareness that we are wholly and inescapably steeped in nature. It is equally inescapable that the decisions we make have ramifications for the natural environment. The food we eat, the cars we drive (or choose not to drive), the candidates we vote for (or do not vote for), how we dispose of our waste, the light bulbs we install, how we invest our money, the clothes we wear, the recreation we take, and a myriad of other common twenty-first century human activities either directly or indirectly impact the natural environment.

The claim that human beings characteristically interact with and impress the natural environment requires that there is a substantive distinction between natural and unnatural components of the environment. There are some that might be inclined to deny this. Bill McKibben famously argues that the end of nature

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is upon us. Human activities, he claims, have resulted (in quite a short time) in climatic changes that render every place at least in part artificial.¹⁹ Steven Vogel has recently gone (at least) a step further to argue in favour of a 'postnaturalism' in environmental philosophy which recognises that 'nature has *always* already ended.'²⁰ But as Vogel rightly points out, the term *nature* is ambiguous, as much for him and McKibben as for others, and we must be clear about which conception of nature is 'philosophically dangerous',²¹ no longer (or never did) have a referent, and is no longer (or never was) tenable. The conception that both Vogel and McKibben target is a conception of nature as sequestered from and untouched by human activities. In Vogel's case it is also a normative conception of nature, according to which nature acts as a guide for resolving environmental problems. 'Environmental questions,' Vogel writes, 'are social and political ones, to be answered by us and not by nature'.²² This, however, is not the conception I employ above. There the explicit concern is how to approach *interactions* and ongoing *relationships* with the natural environment. The conception of nature as pristine and untouched is therefore not operative. So objections to the viability of a pristine and/or normative conception of nature do not count against the descriptive and common-sensical one at work in the claim that human beings characteristically interact with and impress the natural environment when we farm, pollute, log, damn, mine, garden, revitalise, hunt, introduce species, suppress forest fires, and so on. Insofar as we do these things and others like them, we are engaged with the natural environment.

Moreover, there is a range of dispositions that we might bring to those engagements. Famously, one can be either anthropocentric or not. One can be disposed to treat nature as a mere resource to be optimised or as something valuable in itself to be preserved for its own sake. People are variously disposed to treat nature as something to be studied, understood, subdued, and as something mysterious, sublime, unpredictable, and transcendent. Some turn to nature for inspiration, renewal, nurturing and insight while others find it debasing, mean and destructive. Some perceive nature as alien, whereas others perceive it as an intimate. These various perspectives (and surely this list is not exhaustive) combine in complex ways to render a variety of dispositions towards the non-human natural environment.

It is also plain that these various dispositions are states that decide. A state that decides is a disposition that recognises certain kinds of considerations as having a certain amount of normative force. So if the various environmental dispositions discussed above provide a range of states that decided, then agents with distinct dispositions over that range will tend to take the same considerations to have different normative force. This is just what we find. Many international, national and local environmental issues pit conservationists against preservationist against advocates of unencumbered growth, even on occasions when there is general agreement about the relevant facts and policy implications.²³ Those with disparate environmental dispositions disagree on environmental issues and

display different environmental behaviour in cases where all other things are equal. Just as one's disposition towards the welfare of others is, *ceteris paribus*, a state that decides whether to assist the injured fellow on the trailside, one's disposition towards the natural environment is, *ceteris paribus*, a state that decides whether to clear cut one's backyard to avoid leaf cleanup.

What is left, then, is whether these various states that decide – these competing environmental dispositions – admit rational assessment. Can these states be shown to be more or less justified? The best argument that they can be is that some have. Paul Taylor, for example, has shown that, given a proper naturalistic understanding of human beings, there is no good non-question-begging defence of certain forms of anthropocentrism – those employing the notion of human superiority.²⁴ Therefore, environmental ethics that rely on or employ the claim of human superiority are indefensible, and a disposition of human superiority is unjustified. There will no doubt be many that disagree with Taylor. However, insofar as those who dissent are able to advance critical arguments or arguments for contrary positions they are themselves engaged in rational assessment of the quality of the disposition in question. Another example of an issue with implications for the quality of certain dispositions towards the natural environment is whether nature possesses intrinsic value. If nature has intrinsic value, then an indifferent disposition toward the natural environment is unjustified. Disputes about the cogency of the concept and its applicability to aspects of the natural environment are thus also disagreements about the quality of particular environmental dispositions.²⁵

In this section I have argued that there is an environmental virtue that is a human excellence in just the same way and with just the same normative standing as the conventional personal and interpersonal virtues. In the next section I explore the normative resources furnished by this conception of environmental virtue and the capacity for an environmental virtue ethic employing this conception to avail those resources in response to the theoretical concerns of those sceptical of the possibility of an adequate environmental virtue ethic.

THE NORMATIVITY OF ECOLOGICAL SENSITIVITY

In the previous section I argued that the conditions are met for the obtaining of a character virtue – hereafter, ecological sensitivity – whose domain is interactions and relationships with the natural environment. In this section I explore some of the implications of recognising ecological sensitivity as a virtue with normative status equal to the conventional personal and interpersonal virtues. As indicated earlier, environmental virtue ethics are typically considered a supplement rather than an alternative to other varieties of environmental ethics in large part because they are thought to lack sufficient normative resources. The

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conception of environmental virtue defended above, however, promises to defy those concerns.²⁶

When extensionists discuss environmental virtue, their project is primarily to specify the character traits that an environmentally virtuous person must possess.²⁷ They aim to provide an account of the character dispositions of the environmentally virtuous person in the same sense that a Christian virtue ethic identifies the character dispositions that any Christianly virtuous person must possess, or a scholarly virtue ethic identifies the character dispositions that any scholarly virtuous person must possess. But while there may be character dispositions that make for excellent scholars such that we can talk about scholarly virtue, that does not mean that a virtuous person *simpliciter* will possess those character dispositions. Scholarly virtue does not imply virtue *simpliciter*. The extensionist conception of environmental virtue similarly leaves open whether being an environmentally virtuous person is necessary for being a virtuous person *simpliciter*, and whether being a virtuous person *simpliciter* is sufficient for being environmentally virtuous.²⁸

The significance of this is that if environmental virtue is not a human excellence it has normative force only hypothetically. It has normative force only for those who desire to be environmentally virtuous, desire to appear environmentally virtuous, have come to hold some position that requires environmental virtue, or for whom environmental virtue maintains some other instrumental relationship to a desired end. But that sort of selective normativity will not be sufficient for an environmental virtue ethic to provide an alternative to rights-based, consequentialist, pragmatic and intuitionist approaches. Environmental virtue, if it is going to provide the requisite normativity must have normative force that bears on moral agents *qua* moral agent. It must be something that one ought to cultivate independently of one's desires or position, and just because one is a human person in this world. As such, the dispositions that are required to be environmentally virtuous must be part of or entailed by the dispositions that are required to be virtuous *simpliciter*. An environmental virtue ethic will lack the requisite normative force if environmentally degradative practices betray a lack of environmental virtue, but not a lack of virtue *simpliciter*. So defending an environmental virtue ethic that is an alternative to other approaches to environmental ethics requires not just articulating the virtues or set of virtues that an environmentally considerate person would possess, but defending an account of *the virtues* that ensures ecological sensitivity. That is, it must identify the disposition(s) towards the natural environment that *any virtuous person* would possess.

On the non-extensionist conception of environmental virtue defended herein environmental virtue functions in this capacity. It is an excellence for any human moral agent. It is something that one ought to cultivate independently of one's desires or position, and just because one is a human person in this world. The

'ought' in 'You ought to be environmentally virtuous' is, on the non-extensionist conception, categorical for all human moral agents, and ecological sensitivity is normative for all human moral agents.

If ecological sensitivity is a human character virtue then it should be operative in all environmental interactions and relationships. It is the human excellence peculiar to those interactions and has authority in them. In many cases ecological sensitivity will converge with other virtues in support of what many would consider enlightened environmental behaviours and policies. If, for example, as Laura Westra has argued,²⁹ human health is tied to the integrity of ecosystems and those ecosystems are in a critical state where even 'minimally' destabilising behaviours could have drastic repercussions for ecosystem integrity, then prudence (just as ecological sensitivity) would favour ecologically sustainable and non-degradative practices and policies. This would not be a case where theoretically contrary ethics render the same practical guidance. It would be two normative aspects of the same ethical theory reinforcing each other.

In cases where no other virtues are operative, ecological sensitivity offers normative guidance where otherwise there would be none. Take, for example, cases similar to Hill's.³⁰ Why not pave over this patch of prairie? Or clear this stand of trees? Because to do so is ecologically insensitive and therefore vicious, and one ought not be vicious. This asserts something much stronger than Hill managed – that such behaviour betrays a lack of the basis for the natural development of certain human excellences – and it does so straightforwardly and without contrivance. The same would not be true of an extensionist attempt to ground the same claim. An extensionist would have to supply a virtue applicable to interpersonal interactions that is plausibly extended to provide injunction in this case. But what virtue would do? Loyalty would not. Loyalty is applicable only to a certain range of interpersonal interactions, those involving persons who have a history that underwrites allegiance and faithfulness to each other. Therefore, it cannot be plausibly extended to apply to interactions between a person and some stand of trees they have just encountered.³¹ Friendship will not do for similar reasons. Compassion will not do as one's actions in this case need not have likely consequences for the pain (or lack thereof) of sentient creatures. Even malevolence as the basis of the sanction is tenuous, as we need not imagine the culprit consumed by malice or ill will. She might even have some non-maleficent reason for wanting to clear the trees – extending the ultimate frisbee pitch, perhaps. These kinds of cases reveal a limitation of the extensionist program: it has coverage problems. As the virtues from interpersonal interactions and relationships are stretched to provide coverage over a greater range of environmental interactions and relationships, the less tenable (or more metaphorical) the extension becomes. Environmental virtue conceived of as a virtue endemic to naturalistic interactions is not subject to that difficulty. It is able to provide a presumption against all ecologically insensitive environmental practices.³²

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On the conception I am defending environmental virtue is a virtue on normative par with the other virtues of character. Ecological concerns are therefore not the default area of compromise. They are not something that we turn to only when everything else (politically or personally) is in order. When ecological sensitivity pulls in opposition to another virtue – when, for example, a real human health threat requires sizeable release of toxic chemicals into the environment – there is no presumption that what ecological sensitivity recommends is subordinate. Each case must be examined individually. On some occasions what ecological sensitivity recommends will be properly subordinated, on others it will not. But in all cases a course of action that does not offend any virtue is preferable to one that does.³³ This is significant, given that there is nearly always an alternative to environmentally insensitive behaviour or policies that does not compromise the demands of some other virtue.

These considerations indicate that recognition of environmental virtue as a character virtue on par with the conventionally human virtues has substantial normative significance. In what follows I bring the normative resources of this conception of environmental virtue to bear on the specific concerns raised by those sceptical of the possibility of an adequate environmental virtue ethic. In each case, the resources are present to satisfactorily address the concern.

1. It is not possible to provide an objective specification of environmental virtue.

This concern arises out of the recognition that there will often be cross-cultural disagreement regarding which spheres of human activity admit virtue, and even where there is cross-cultural agreement on the domain of a particular virtue there will be disagreement on its definite specification.³⁴ The challenge to the objectivist given these cross-cultural disagreements is to provide a neutral framework for adjudicating between and assessing competing cultural claims. The approach employed herein is such a framework. The facts that (1) it is a characteristic feature of the life of a human being that she deal in matters concerning the natural environment, (2) human beings have a state that decides relative to her interactions with the natural environment, and (3) there is a range of states (dispositions) that human beings might have regarding the natural environment, are culturally neutral. They rely on no particular cultural norms, and they are true of human moral agents across all cultural contexts. Collectively they entail that there is a distinctive environmental sphere, and that it is appropriate to consider whether any of the possible character dispositions regarding activities in that sphere is a virtue. Moreover, it is clear from earlier illustrations – the intrinsic value and anthropocentrism debates – that assessment of members of the range of disposition is not mere cultural assertion. They involve conceptual analyses, ethical principles, and environmental science that, if true, are so independently of (or even in spite of) particular cultural conceptions. If it turns out that all mammals

have intrinsic value then a disposition of indifference to the suffering of mice in lab experiments is unjustified, regardless of the prevailing cultural norm.³⁵

2. Environmental virtue ethics lack the theoretical resources to provide sustained and justified critique of obtaining cultural practices and policies.

The possibility of an objective specification of environmental virtue speaks directly to the inapplicability of this charge to environmental virtue ethics. Because (1) the substance of environmental virtue (on the conception defended herein) is not culturally determined and (2) environmental virtue (on the conception defended herein) is normative for all human moral agents, an environmental virtue ethic employing this conception provides an objective platform from which prevailing cultural attitudes, policies, practices, and lifestyles can be judged and, when appropriate, indicted. If a cultural practice or policy fails to exhibit ecological sensitivity, then it is subject to criticism for that reason, unless there is sufficient justification for subordinating the ecologically sensitive course of action in that instance. Moreover, what counts as sufficient justification for subordination will be subject to review from a culturally independent standpoint to the extent that assessment of the quality of character dispositions for other areas of human activity are located outside cultural conceptions. This does not, however, imply insensitivity to cultural context. To affirm an objective platform for assessing environmental practices is not to deny that cultural context is material in ethical deliberations.

3. Environmental virtue ethics do not provide sufficient action-guidance.

The worry manifest in this criticism is that a full specification of environmental virtue will provide an account of what sort of disposition one should have regarding the natural environment, and perhaps derivatively indicate the general sort of environmental behaviour one should engage in, but will not provide specific action-guidance in concrete situations. An environmental virtue ethic, the critic acknowledges, might well establish that one should act in ways that display ecological sensitivity, but that is not to direct agents regarding what those ways are, nor is it to provide a decision-making mechanism by which agents who are not already disposed to act with ecological sensitivity can determine which actions are ecologically sensitive and which are not. However, recent work on the capacity of virtue ethics to provide action-guidance has shown that virtue ethics does have the normative resources to be sufficiently action-guiding and that these criticisms are misplaced.³⁶ This work, coupled with environmental virtue having the same status as the conventional human character virtues, implies that this will be true as much in environmental contexts as in other spheres of human activity that admit virtue. What follows is a brief rehearsal, particularised to the environmental context, of a virtue ethics response to the charge that it is not sufficiently action-guiding.

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It is true that a virtue ethic does not (and does not purport to) provide a finite set of rules and/or principles that can be applied formulaically by any moral agent in any situation to yield a unique action-guiding prescription. It is for this reason – that virtue ethics does not fit the modern scientific model – that many do not consider virtue ethics to be a proper ethical theory.³⁷ But to concede that virtue ethics does not (and does not attempt to) fit the scientific model is not to concede that virtue ethics is neither normative nor action-guiding. It is merely to note that virtue ethics does not provide action-guidance along that model. The issue, then, is whether the alternative model virtue ethics offers is action-guiding.

Virtue ethicists quite rightly recognise that those who are not virtuous will typically not be at a complete loss regarding what the virtuous thing to do is. All but the most corrupted moral agents have some capacity to see what is just or honest or loyal (and so on) in a particular contexts. An individual who acts unethically often does so in spite of her knowledge of what is the virtuous thing to do. She simply lacks the disposition that disposes her to do the virtuous thing. This, of course, is not to offer a model of action guidance, but it is to restrict the scope of the critic's concern.

The model that virtue ethicists offer includes (1) v-rules drawn from the concrete specification of the substance of the particular virtues, (2) the use of mentors and models, and (3) moral wisdom. The most general v-rules simply embody the particular virtues – 'be honest' and 'be courageous' are examples of these general rules. However, more specific v-rules will follow from more concrete specifications of the particular virtues. If a disposition to help alleviate the suffering of others when there is little cost to oneself is shown to be partly constitutive of compassion, then there will be a corresponding v-rule – 'help alleviate the suffering of others when there is little cost to oneself' – and if anthropocentrism is shown to be unjustified, then there will be a corresponding prohibition – 'do not act in ways that are anthropocentric.' These v-rules can be taught, learned, and applied to provide action guidance by those who do not have the corresponding disposition. Doing so is not only common; it is an essential component of an individual's moral education and her development of moral wisdom. Moreover, the v-rules can be derived by those who are not virtuous through ethical theorising and reflection on what dispositions are constitutive of the virtues. V-rules are thus action-guiding in just the same way that deontological rules are action guiding. The difference is that the underpinnings of the v-rules are the virtues, not the categorical imperative or some other fundamental ethical principle.

In cases where there are no obviously applicable v-rules and the agent is not able to determine any through ethical theorising, and/or there are conflicting v-rules, virtue ethicists do not appeal to an over-arching principle of adjudicating, but instead look to role models, advisors, and moral wisdom for guidance. It is here that virtue ethics deviates significantly from the scientific model. Virtue ethicists (typically) deny that any moral agent *qua* moral agent can determine,

in any situation whatsoever, what the ethical thing to do is simply by proper application of rules and principles. In some cases discerning the virtuous course of action requires moral wisdom, which is not something that all moral agents possess to the same degree. Moral wisdom is not, however, something mysteriously intuitive or occult. It is merely a sensitivity regarding the application of the virtues – or an understanding of what is involved in being virtuous – in particular contexts, a sensitivity that one develops through attentive experience. It does not, however, follow from the appeal to the need for moral wisdom in these cases that those who lack moral wisdom are left without resources for guidance. They can look to those that are morally wise either as advisors, mentors, or models. This is in fact something that we often do. When we are unsure of what the ethical thing to do is, we seek guidance from those who are our moral superiors in the relevant area (be they family, friends, religious leaders or historical figures). So action guidance in virtue ethics is accomplished through the application of the relevant v-rules (knowledge of which is acquired through moral education and ethical reflection) to the concrete situation, and when necessary informed by moral wisdom, the counsel of mentors, and the study of models. This is not the scientific model advocated by many Kantians and utilitarians, but it is a viable method for determining what the ethical thing to do is in concrete situations.

Ecological sensitivity is the virtue applicable to human activities and interactions with the natural environment. Therefore, ecological sensitivity ought to be brought to bear in all such interactions. So, for example, an individual considering whether to clear-cut a stand of old-growth forest to improve her view from her den window must consider whether her action is ecologically sensitive. She does this by reflecting on what the substance of ecological sensitivity is, and what the ecological ramifications are of her clearing the trees. If she is ecologically sensitive she will see which courses of action are ecologically sensitive in this situation. If she is not ecologically sensitive she will have to draw from the ecological v-rules she has been taught as well as those that she is able to derive from reflecting on which dispositions toward the natural environment are and are not justified. She may also need to do some research on the ecological significance of her action. If it remains unclear to her what ecological sensitivity calls for, or if there are virtues that recommend a course of action contrary to those recommended by ecological sensitivity, she should then seek guidance from those she recognises as her moral superiors in this area.³⁸

What is distinctive about the environmental virtue ethics decision-making procedure is its focus on the substance of ecological sensitivity (as well as the extensionist environmental virtues) and the role of moral wisdom and advising. For an environmental virtue ethic, the normative force of a particular action-guiding prescription is drawn from environmental virtue. If it turns out that the woman in this case ought not clear the stand of trees, the reason will not

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be that doing so would not produce the best consequences or that the maxim it embodies cannot consistently be willed to be universal law; the reason will be that doing so would not be ecologically sensitive.

4. Environmental virtue ethics cannot ground constraints on human activities regarding the non-human natural environment.

If (as I have argued) an environmental virtue ethic has the normative resources to require of agents that they perform particular actions, adopt particular practices, or put into place particular policies in specific environmental situations, then, in virtue of those same resources, it has the capacity to place constraints on behaviours and policies. The conception of environmental virtue defended herein applies categorically to all human moral agents. To fail to act in an ecologically sensitive manner (without sufficient aretaic justification) is to act viciously. To act viciously is impermissible. So any action that embodies ecological insensitivity is impermissible. If having more than two children is ecologically insensitive in a particular context, then there is a constraint against having more than two children in that context. Whether a particular action or policy is ecologically insensitive will be determined by proper reflection – guided by moral wisdom and, when necessary, role models and mentors – on the substantive account of ecological insensitivity and the relevant ecological facts. There will, admittedly, be occasions when it is difficult to determine whether some action would be ecologically insensitive. But that epistemological concern does not undermine the prohibition against human activities that are ecologically insensitive.

CONCLUSION

An environmental virtue ethic can have the normative wherewithal to function as an alternative to more traditional approaches to environmental ethics. Objections to a virtue ethics approach on the grounds that it cannot meet the theoretical components of the adequacy condition are unfounded. This is significant, since the most prevalent objections to the approach involve a claim about the poverty of its normative resources. However, it is not to establish any particular environmental ethic as adequate. It remains to be seen whether an environmental virtue ethic that employs the conception of environmental virtue necessary to meet the theoretical adequacy conditions can also meet the practical efficacy condition. Moreover, there is the considerable challenge of providing a robust substantive specification of the disposition that constitutes ecological sensitivity. There is, therefore, considerable work still to be done before one could claim that environmental virtue ethics is a legitimate alternative to more traditional approaches to environmental ethics.

NOTES

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¹ Hill (1983).

² Hill (1983), abstract.

³ For a discussion of the centrality of these two issues to environmental virtue ethics see Sandler (forthcoming).

⁴ For example, Norton (1995) and Minteer (1998, 2001).

⁵ For example, Cafaro (2001), Harmon (2001) and Welchman (1999).

⁶ For example, Callicott (1996), Westra (1997) and Rolston III (1998).

⁷ For a concise review of this exchange see Sandler (2003a).

⁸ For example, Cafaro (2001), Hill (1983) and Frasz (1993, 2001).

⁹ The methodology is employed, for example, by Frasz (1993, 2001), Erickson (1994), Welchman (1999) and Shaw (1997).

¹⁰ Frasz (2001), p. 9 and endnote 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² Welchman (1999).

¹³ Specifically, they make for a person willing to ‘devote a substantial percentage of one’s thoughts and efforts to maintaining or enhancing the condition of some thing(s) or person(s), not primarily for the steward’s own sake’ (415).

¹⁴ Moreover, as Frasz’s arguments make clear, one can also appeal to the benefits of developing the kind of history that makes the application of these virtues to environmental interactions appropriate, and in so doing argue in favour of cultivating those histories and the corresponding virtues.

¹⁵ Cardinal virtues excepted. On the conception of environmental virtue that I am articulating environmental virtue is a character virtue with application to a particular sphere of human activity – that of environmental interactions and relationships. Cardinal virtues, however, are not sphere-specific virtues.

¹⁶ *NE* 1106a14-1106a25.

¹⁷ *NE* 1107a1-1107a9.

¹⁸ Compassion, for example, is for human beings a character virtue because it is a characteristic feature of the life of a human being (as social creatures and creatures that interact with sentient non-human animals) that she deal in matters concerning the suffering of others. There is a state that decides regarding performance in those matters. There is a range of dispositions (i.e., states that decide) one might have towards the pain of others. And members of that range can be assessed as more or less rationally defensible. The virtue of compassion just is the proper (maximally defensible) disposition for a human

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being to have with regard to actions with likely consequences for the suffering (or lack thereof) of others.

¹⁹ McKibben (1989).

²⁰ Vogel (2002).

²¹ *Ibid*, abstract.

²² *Ibid*, abstract.

²³ Globally we see this on issues such as global warming, whale hunting, and fishery management; nationally (in the United States) in disputes such as ANWAR, mountain-top mining, logging on public lands, and the use of motorised vehicles in national parks; and locally regarding such things as municipal zoning and permit issuance to potentially high-impact industries.

²⁴ Taylor (1986). See, also, Rachels (1990).

²⁵ In Sandler (forthcoming) I discuss several considerations relevant to assessing particular environmental dispositions.

²⁶ Throughout this discussion I am assuming a virtue ethics account of right action. Perhaps the best known contemporary formulation is Rosalind Hursthouse's (1991, 1999): 'An action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.' Two significant alternative accounts are Swanton's (2001, 2003) and Slote's (1992).

²⁷ Frasz (1993), for example, is explicit that his project concerns 'qualities of character that an environmentally virtuous person must possess' (260). Similarly, Cafaro's (2001) explicit concern is identifying 'certain ethical positions that any environmental virtue ethic worthy of the name must embrace' (3, abstract).

²⁸ One exception is Hill (1983), who is explicit that it is not. Hill's view is not that indifference to nonsentient nature and a lack of environmental virtue entails the absence of some human excellence, but that one's attitudes towards the natural environment is connected in some looser sense to the human excellences. The sense he suggests is that while 'indifference to nonsentient nature does not *necessarily* reflect the absence of virtues, it often signals the absence of certain traits which we want to encourage because they are, in most cases, a natural basis for development of certain virtues' (216).

²⁹ Westra (1998).

³⁰ Hill (1983).

³¹ It will not do to argue that a person must be loyal to a tree to which they are a stranger because the tree is part of nature with which all individuals have a history that calls for loyalty. It is not true in human affairs that loyalty to a whole requires loyalty to a part. Loyalty to one's university does not entail loyalty to each professor.

³² It might be argued that the account of environmental virtue I am defending suffers from indiscriminate coverage of environmental interactions. It treats all environmental interactions and relationships with a single environmental disposition, a single virtue/vice paradigm. Given the variation of our interactions, relationships and activities involving the natural environment surely such an approach lacks sensitivity. I am sympathetic to this concern. It may well be that there are several species of environmental virtue, each peculiar to a particular type or area of environmental interaction. However, the approach to virtue specification and the criteria for there being a virtue that I have defended can accommodate multiple environmental virtues so long as each meets the criteria in a

sufficiently distinctive way. This objection is therefore not a challenge to the theoretical approach being defended. It is a challenge to one of the operating assumptions, which can be altered without undermining the general theoretical approach.

³³ Moreover, when offence is appropriate the ecologically sensitive person will be disposed to minimise and redress it.

³⁴ Two particularly sophisticated and influential formulations of these concerns are MacIntyre (1981) and Williams (1985). For a discussion of these concerns and the outline of an Aristotelian response to them see Nussbaum (1996).

³⁵ For a more detailed response to this concern see Sandler (2003b).

³⁶ Hursthouse (1999, 1996, 1991), Swanton (2001, 2003) and Slote (1992).

³⁷ For discussion of this point see Hursthouse (1996), pp. 31-36.

³⁸ This method of action guidance does not imply that in all environmental situations there will be one uniquely correct course of action. There are two reasons for this. First, the account is compatible with pluralism in the expression of environmental virtue. To say that any virtuous person will be sensitive to, or disposed to respond to, certain considerations in the appropriate way, is not to say that all virtuous persons would respond to those considerations in the same way. For example, any ecologically sensitive person will be disposed to resist wanton environmental degradation. However, some might directly intervene, some might work to change the institutions or policies that enable the degradation, some might attempt to raise awareness of the degradation and the suffering it causes, and so on. So even a full account of ecological sensitivity (which I am not providing here) will often leave underdetermined how a particular ecologically sensitive person will be disposed to act in some concrete situation. The second reason is that on some occasions there may be genuine ethical dilemmas regarding the natural environment. That is, there may be no single correct course of action in a particular environmental situation. These dilemmas might be tragic or not; but in any case they might give rise to disagreement among environmentally virtuous persons regarding what should be done. So the virtue ethics approach to environmental ethics that I am advocating allows for genuine and sincere disagreement even among environmentally virtuous persons.

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