VIRTUES

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Summary

Virtue ethics is one of several approaches to moral problems current in modern moral philosophy that may be used to articulate and defend the belief that all environmentalists share, namely that a radical change in the way people deal with nature is imperative. Although virtue ethics dates back to Plato and Aristotle, its modern version has appeared so recently that there is as yet hardly any literature that applies it to environmentalism; so it is unclear how it will work out. Normative virtue ethics directs us to do what the virtuous person would do, and hence, when applied to real issues, it usually presupposes a list of familiar virtues and vices. But will the familiar list prove adequate to defend environmentalism? On the one hand it seems that much of what is wrong about our current practices with regard to nature springs from such familiar and ancient vices as greed, self-indulgence, shortsightedness, cruelty, vanity, dishonesty, cowardice, and arrogance, just as war, poverty, and "man's inhumanity to man" do. On the other hand, it may be that the most plausible attempts to show why and how our current practices exemplify those vices will involve introducing new, hitherto unrecognized and unnamed virtues. Two possibilities are a virtue related to the emotion of wonder, and another adapted from Paul Taylor's "respect for nature."

1. Philosophical Background

The main way in which the topic of the virtues arises in the context of environmental ethics is through the expressed disagreements between academic philosophers who share the belief that a fairly radical change in the way humans deal with nature is imperative. Whether this belief—henceforth "the green belief"—is shared by all modern moral philosophers or only by those who write on environmental issues, I do not know, but even if it is only the latter, the level of consensus is still a noteworthy fact. Although one may find philosophical writers arguing for or against abortion, euthanasia, capital

punishment, vegetarianism, fox-hunting, aid to the developing world, censorship, and most other ethical issues, no modern moral philosopher, as far as I know, has gone into print attempting a general defense of our current practices with regard to nature. When the green belief is discussed, it is assumed to be obviously true, or argued for; no one tries to argue against it.

Given their sharing of the green belief, their shared concern about our current practices, what do philosophers who write on environmental ethics find to disagree about? Speaking broadly, philosophers disagree about how best to *articulate and defend* the green belief. And the topic of the *virtues* appears when some philosophers claim that the best way emphasizes virtues—character traits that are possessed and exercised by ethically good or admirable people—a general approach in moral philosophy that has come to be known as "virtue ethics." Although virtue ethics is, in one sense, very old, dating back to the moral philosophy of the ancient Greeks, Plato, and Aristotle, its revival in modern dress is still a comparatively recent phenomenon, so recent indeed that there is still very little literature that applies it to real moral issues. Thereby only a minute amount addresses issues in environmental ethics in its terms; hence much of what follows is exploratory and speculative.

Virtue ethics is routinely contrasted with just two other approaches—utilitarianism and deontology. The former emphasizes the ethical significance of promoting happiness and minimizing suffering, and although many proponents of utilitarianism used to write as if only human happiness and suffering mattered, its founding father, Jeremy Bentham, had insisted that no such restriction was warranted. Any creature capable of suffering was a proper object of concern for the utilitarian, and insistence on this point has been the driving force of Peter Singer's influential writings on animal liberation and speciesism.

Few environmentalists have questioned the idea that utilitarianism is capable of providing a powerful defense of the green belief, even if it limits itself to condemning practices that are having, or will have, an indisputably adverse effect on the welfare of human beings, such as adverse effects on our physical health. If it extends its brief to encompass the welfare of other creatures capable of enjoyment and suffering, or to the more disputable adverse effects on human beings, such as the impairment of our psychological health or the impoverishment of our enjoyment or happiness, it can defend very radical versions of the green belief.

But what non-utilitarians do question is whether the utilitarian defense has got to the heart of the matter and articulated the green belief adequately. Do we ("we environmentalists," that is) think that our current practices with regard to the environment must change, that they are wrong, insofar as these practices are having, or will have, adverse effects on the welfare of human beings (or human beings and other creatures capable of suffering)? Is that all there is to the green belief—a recognition of the bad consequences of so many of our practices that need to be pointed out to non-environmentalists? And the non-utilitarian environmentalist philosophers say "No, that's not all there is to it."

An imaginary example, common in environmentalist literature may be used to illustrate the non-utilitarians' qualms. Imagine a set-up in which there is a smallish and rather

ecologically isolated area that contains many living plants, and microorganisms, but no creatures capable of suffering, except for one human being. Further, it contains no rare plants or microorganisms. And imagine that the human being lays it to waste, say with a flamethrower, just for the hell of it. Assuming that anyone who holds the green belief is going to say that what this person did was terribly wrong in some way, the question then is—why? The point of the way the example is so carefully (and artificially) constructed is to rule out the utilitarians saying "It's wrong because it will have adverse effects on sentient creatures." On the face of it, they will have to admit that it is highly unlikely, albeit remotely possible, that it will have any such effect, and thereby be forced either to say that probably there is not anything wrong with what the person with the flamethrower does, or to give a rather implausibly elaborate account of what is wrong with it.

This sort of example—of the wanton destruction of natural but non-sentient objects, even inanimate ones—is a gripping one. It was originally used to illustrate the need for "a new ethic" to articulate the green belief, an ethic that broke free of the (supposed) Western ethical tradition of "human chauvinism" or "human centeredness." But just what counts as "a new ethic" in the required sense—an ethic particularly appropriate to the green belief—has become increasingly unclear as the literature has developed. As noted above, Singer's utilitarianism, following Bentham, immediately broke free of the tradition that maintained that only human beings mattered, morally speaking. But does that make it a new ethic, or merely an extension of an old one? Should we say "How new and radical!" or "Oh no, not consequences for welfare and suffering—that standard, Christian, human concern—*again*"? The same question, *mutatis mutandis*, arises in relation to deontological attempts to ascribe rights not only to non-human animals but also to plants, rocks and rivers. Should we say "How new and radical!" or "Rights? That parochial, individualist, Enlightenment concept—*again*!"

I take it as a premise that these are trivial questions. What moral philosophers who are concerned about environmental issues want is a good articulation and defense of the green belief. "Old" or "human centered" are, as such, no criticisms of a proposed articulation and defense and, correspondingly "new" and "biocentric" (or whatever), are, as such, no recommendations. However, this is not to deny that an ethic adequate to the green belief is going to call for radical change in something. It is part and parcel of that belief that a radical change in our current practices is called for and, thereby, a test of the proposed ethic's adequacy to its task that it clearly calls for them.

2. Basic Normative Virtue Ethics

The most straightforward way to grasp the difference between virtue ethics, on the one hand, and utilitarianism and deontology, on the other, is to think of the three different ethical theories as giving different answers to the practical question "What shall I do?" asked by a *moral* agent, that is, by someone who isn't just concerned with satisfying her own desires but who aims to act well or do what is right. Oversimplifying somewhat, the utilitarian may be taken as saying "Do whatever will have the best consequences overall, regarding maximizing welfare or minimizing suffering." And the deontologist says "Do whatever you have a duty or an obligation to do," with the background assumption that many, if not all, duties and obligations derive from corresponding

rights. And the virtue ethicist says "Do what the virtuous person would do in the circumstances."

Deontology and virtue ethics share a problem from which utilitarianism is comparatively free. If I set out to follow the utilitarian's advice, I might have a few worries about how I can be sure what the consequences of my action will be, and sometimes some deep worries about what counts as real welfare and real suffering. (The Cat Protection League recommends neutering tomcats at some stage of their lives on the grounds that this reduces their suffering. "Perhaps so, but does it thereby promote their welfare?" I might wonder. Given how much female cheetahs suffer in the wild trying to feed themselves while pregnant, should I be campaigning to find ways of rendering female cheetahs sterile? Or to simply kill them off? That would reduce the suffering but with what long-term consequences?) But, by and large, in concrete situations, what the utilitarian directs me to do seems unproblematic.

Not so with the other two approaches. Until their proponents tell me just what my duties or obligations are (the deontologists) or what character traits the virtuous person possesses (the virtue ethicists), they have not given me any direction about what to do at all. Hence the wealth of writing in the abstract areas of ethical theory attempting to provide a rational validation of familiar moral duties (such as the duty not to kill or lie) or familiar virtues (such as justice and honesty). But within normative or applied ethics, deontologists and virtue ethicists usually just assume the familiar lists of duties or virtues and vices, as premises—argument has to start somewhere and proceed from there.

However, when it comes to the defense and articulation of the green belief, there is a non-trivial version of the question of whether an environmental ethics has to be new; namely, will the familiar lists prove adequate to the task? In what follows, I shall suggest (very tentatively, since, as I said, the field is so new and relatively unexplored) that, as far as virtue ethics is concerned, the answer to that question is "Probably not—some new virtues or vices will probably have to be discussed."

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

Routinely, this complex and elusive concept is grasped through a noun that names the character trait (for example, "generosity") with an associated adjective ("generous")

that can apply to people and to acts—to people as possessing the character trait, and to acts that, though not necessarily springing from the virtue, are typical of it. So the introduction of a brand new virtue would, on the face of it, need to involve the coining of a new term naming a complex unity of dispositions to act and feel for certain sorts of reasons, and to see and respond to things in certain sorts of ways, a unity that could be recognized as a way human beings could be. And that, ideally, had a corresponding adjective that could single out not only a particular sort of people (those who possessed the virtue, to at least some extent) but also a particular sort of act.

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Biographical Sketch

Rosalind Hursthouse did her undergraduate degree and M.A. in philosophy at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and then proceeded to the B.Phil. and D.Phil. at Oxford University, U.K. While writing her doctoral thesis, she tutored for six years at Corpus Christi College, and then moved to the Open University where she remained very happily for the next 25 years. In her time at Oxford, she worked with Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot, who remain powerful influences in her work to this day. Led and inspired by them, she became interested in virtue ethics early in her career, and a series of articles in that area culminated in *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999). She has recently returned to her roots and a chair at the University of Auckland, where she is head of the Philosophy Department.