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# THE VIRTUES OF ACKNOWLEDGED ECOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE: SUSTAINABILITY, AUTONOMY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

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## ABSTRACT

An extension of Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of 'virtues of acknowledged dependence', to include relationships with the non-human world, offers an organising principle for environmental virtue ethics. It situates ecological virtue among more traditional virtues of inter-human relationships, and may thereby contribute to an ethical reconciliation of policies aimed at encouraging ecological virtue with those aimed at protecting the freedoms required for personal autonomy. Within this eudaimonist framework, ecological virtue may be understood and promoted as directly contributing to a good life.

## KEYWORDS

Environmental virtue ethics; sustainability; autonomy; eudaimonism; MacIntyre

Contemporary environmental policy-making increasingly seeks 'win-win solutions' which do not require attitudinal or political change. The problems with this approach are well illustrated by the idea of 'offsetting', which is spreading rapidly from carbon markets into biodiversity conservation. An offsetting mindset sees no ethical or ontological problems with the claim

that ecological degradation arising from overexploitation, overproduction and overconsumption can be cancelled out by additional conservation efforts elsewhere, leaving ‘no net loss’ (Hannis and Sullivan, 2012; Sullivan and Hannis 2015). The calculative utilitarianism which legitimises such approaches assumes, and enforces, an unjustifiably extreme commensurability of value. It asks many questions about quantities, but few about qualities.

A virtue approach, by contrast, is all about qualities. It asks complex qualitative questions like ‘what kinds of relationships with the nonhuman world characterise a flourishing human life – and what are the virtues of character which build and nurture such relationships?’ This does not mean that quantitatively measurable outcomes are neglected, but rather than aiming to mitigate deleterious consequences of human actions without examining the relevant underlying attitudes, a virtue approach keeps the ethical focus firmly on human attitudes and practices. While mitigation might well often be appropriate in practical terms, from a virtue-ethical perspective it cannot be seen as ‘cancelling out’ the unethical actions which caused the ecological degradation.

This sort of enquiry is sensitive to specifics, contexts and the unquantifiable. It can help understand not only some prerequisites for human well-being, but also some factors which undermine proposed environmental measures, and thereby affect many other species too. One such factor is an apparent conflict between promoting ecologically responsible behaviour and safeguarding the freedoms required for personal autonomy.

How, then, might such enquiry proceed? One strategy is to plunge straight into generating lists of applicable virtues, based on consideration of relevant ‘eco-friendly’ behaviours. A related approach is to extrapolate contrasting virtues from those ‘ecological vices’ which have arguably led us into our present predicament. Plenty of valuable work has been done in both these ways, some of which I discuss below. I intend, though, to argue in favour of stepping back and beginning with some more overarching principle. I suggest that Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of ‘virtues of acknowledged dependence’, elaborated in his book *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999: 9), might provide such a starting point. The argument begins, however, with a discussion of autonomy.

## AUTONOMY AS A VIRTUE

John Benson (1983) argues that autonomy may usefully be seen as a virtue, a balanced mean condition between two vices. On one hand is the vice of deficiency, equating to heteronomy, being entirely governed by the will of others. On the other is the vice of excess: in John Donne's powerful image, acting as if one were an island. Benson at first suggests that this vice might be described as solipsism, evoking a wilful disregard of the existence of others. Refining the idea, he settles instead on 'arrogant self-sufficiency'. This is more accurate, as what is typically disregarded in such a condition is in fact not others' existence, but one's own interdependency and relationships with others, and thus important elements of one's own identity.

On such a view, if a society seeks to promote autonomy by protecting the conditions necessary for its development, it is the virtuous mean between heteronomy and arrogant self-sufficiency which should be nurtured. There is no moral or political obligation to promote or facilitate mistaken extreme conceptions of autonomy which embody these vices of excess or deficiency. On the contrary, social arrangements conducive to human flourishing will discourage such conceptions.

John O'Neill (1998) contrasts Benson's virtue theory model with the more commonly encountered false dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy. This apparent dichotomy is implicit both in some liberal accounts of the 'unencumbered self' (Sandel, 1998), and in communitarian arguments against individualism, such as that offered by the earlier MacIntyre of *After Virtue*:

From the standpoint of individualism I am what I myself choose to be. I can always, if I wish to, put in question what are taken to be the merely contingent social features of my existence. (MacIntyre, 1985: 220)

MacIntyre argues, against this individualist standpoint, for an understanding of personal identity (and thus of individuals' moral commitments) as constituted by the familial, social and historical contexts of a person's life. What constitutes a good life for a particular individual is, from this communitarian perspective, determined in large measure by reference to the goods, traditions and practices of the community (or communities) to which that person belongs. O'Neill is largely sympathetic to this view, but is concerned that it

appear[s] to embrace an indefensible form of heteronomy in which individuals find themselves simply defined by a history and tradition from which no proper distancing is possible. It is one thing to reject a picture of the self who free floats trying on different identities at will. It is another to defend a self who unreflectively embraces that historical constitution they find themselves born into. (O'Neill, 1998: 75)

Communitarian (and some feminist) critiques of liberalism, says O'Neill, are 'misdirected if aimed against the value of autonomy as such' because when so directed they 'accept a particular misconception of the autonomous agent that is being assumed'.<sup>1</sup> This, however, need not be so: such critiques are 'quite compatible with the value of autonomy understood as a condition of having an identity or character', and can in fact provide 'an account of what autonomy in this sense involves and a diagnosis of what is wrong with the "unencumbered" account of the virtue' (ibid.: 75–77).

## AUTONOMY, CHARACTER AND NARRATIVE

Understanding autonomy as a virtue allows makes it clearer that neither the person who tries on different identities at will, nor the person who is entirely defined by history and tradition, has developed an autonomous character. In fact by John Stuart Mill's criterion, neither has developed much of a character at all:

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<sup>1</sup> See Barclay (2000: 56–58) for a discussion of the differences between feminist and communitarian perspectives on relational autonomy.

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre's insight here echoes anthropological discussions of reciprocity and obligation. David Graeber (2011), for instance, argues that it is a modern innovation to see 'paying off one's debts' as ethically and socially desirable: pre-capitalist cultures would see a person who attempted never to be 'in debt' as effectively placing

A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expressions of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam engine has character. (Mill, 1989 [1859]: *On Liberty* III.5)

Character, in this Millian sense, is clearly something that develops over time. Both for the good of individuals, and for the good of society as a whole (which is, as he goes on to say later in the same paragraph, ‘better for containing many persons who have much character’), a key duty of government for Mill is to facilitate this process, and thereby to facilitate the development of characterful people. This underpins *On Liberty*’s more famous injunction that within the parameters of the harm principle, people should remain free to act on their own desires and impulses, in accordance with their character. This, effectively, is what it is to preserve their liberty.

Mill’s concept of character is closely connected to what is now more commonly referred to as a person’s identity, where the term denotes something more than formal or numerical identity. In some contexts a person may be ‘identified’ simply by a name, a list of physical characteristics or even sometimes a number. But such cases merely concern their identity as a physical object, confirming or denying that ‘this is object A’, or that object A and object B are ‘identical’ in the sense of being, in fact, one and the same thing. Questions about their identity as a *person*, however, demand an answer in psychological, sociological and historical terms. Physical characteristics are still part of the picture; ethnicity, gender and class are also important, but this is still not enough. A full picture of a person’s identity, in this sense, requires knowledge of the narrative trajectory of their life to date.

To have a character, and thus an identity, therefore implies being ‘the subject of a life that has some narrative unity, which is such that it is possible to tell a coherent story of its unfolding’ (O’Neill, 1998: 79). As already noted, this cannot necessarily be said of all lives:

To have an identity involves moving in a mean between two conditions: on the one hand, allowing oneself to live a life for and defined by others, without reflection: on

the other, of living a life as if it consisted of endless choices, in which one could in the post-modern jargon ‘play’ with different identities. (ibid.: 77)

Mill would, I think, agree with O’Neill here, notwithstanding his advocacy of ‘experiments of living’:

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself. Where, not the person’s own character, but the traditions of customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress. (Mill, 1989 [1859]: *On Liberty* III.1)

As this celebrated quote makes clear, by ‘experiments of living’ Mill means *not* experiments with different identities, but attempts to live out ‘modes of life’ conducive to one’s own substantive identity or character. He is certainly arguing against heteronomy, but is not in favour of denying or escaping one’s character. It is also worth noting that his toleration of experiments of living stops ‘short of injury to others’: that is, it is still explicitly limited by the harm principle.

The freedom worth protecting, then, is not the freedom to play with different identities, nor conversely the freedom to ‘live a life for and defined by others’, but the freedom to fully express one’s own developing identity over time, to continue one’s existing life in some meaningful way that is determined neither by coercion nor by arbitrary choice but by *who one is*. To be genuinely free, I must be free to be myself. This requires the freedom to maintain the coherence and narrative continuity of my life, but it does not require the freedom to act as if I were an island.

## VIRTUES OF ACKNOWLEDGED DEPENDENCE

Any satisfactory answer to the question of what it is for a life to be coherent, or to have narrative continuity, will contain many references to relationships: with other people, with society at large, with certain places and so forth. To a large extent, my identity, and thus the continuity of my life, is defined by my relationships, and hence their maintenance and development is a key determinant of whether my life can be said to be going well.

In his later work *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), MacIntyre takes up this theme, pointing out first that, as already noted, autonomy is seriously misinterpreted if equated with self-sufficiency. He begins by observing that there are many times in all our lives when we owe our survival, let alone flourishing, to the caring actions of others – yet this does not make us any the less autonomous. Our personal identity is in fact constituted in large part by our places and roles in the ‘networks of giving and receiving’ which make up real human communities. Our development as independent practical reasoners, and thus as flourishing autonomous adults, relies on the understanding and acknowledgement of our dependence, and our practice of the virtues that this entails.

The false dichotomy between autonomy and dependence reflects for MacIntyre a ‘failure or refusal to acknowledge adequately the bodily dimensions of our existence’, an attempt to distance ourselves from ‘mere animality’. Dependence, rationality and animality must be understood in relation to each other, in order to arrive at an understanding of what it is for a human being to flourish:

[T]he virtues of independent rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by the virtues of acknowledged dependence. ... failure to understand this is apt to obscure some features of rational agency. Moreover both sets of virtues are needed in order to actualise the distinctive potentialities that are specific to the human rational animal. (MacIntyre, 1999: 9)

His striking conclusion is that ‘acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence’ (ibid.: 85). MacIntyre argues that it is precisely (and only) through fully understanding and accepting our dependence, and developing the virtues of acknowledged dependence, that we can come to understand just what it is to be *independent*.

These virtues of acknowledged dependence are in large part virtues of giving and receiving, but they involve much more than attention to reciprocity. Maintaining a calculative balance-sheet of entitlements and obligations does not nurture community.<sup>2</sup> Possession and exercise of the virtues of acknowledged dependence, by contrast, allows us to understand and discharge our own responsibilities as a member of a community, a network of giving and receiving. But beyond this, the exercise and transmission of these virtues also maintains the coherence and integrity of these networks, of the social arrangements within which our individual flourishing lives unfold.

MacIntyre identifies another false dichotomy, which he ascribes to Adam Smith, ‘between self-interested market behaviour and altruistic, benevolent behaviour’. This contrast, he says,

obscures from view ... activities in which the goods to be achieved ... are goods that can only be mine insofar as they are also goods of others, that are genuinely common goods, as the goods of networks of giving and receiving are. (ibid.: 119)

It is this focus on the achievement of common goods, and on the maintenance of the social networks of giving and receiving within which these are achieved, which leads him finally to identify the virtues of acknowledged dependence as clustering around a combination of justice and generosity for which, he says, there is no conventional English name. This combined virtue (or cluster of virtues) involves not only discharging one’s responsibilities by giving with good grace and without expectation of direct reciprocity, but also having the

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<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre’s insight here echoes anthropological discussions of reciprocity and obligation. David Graeber (2011), for instance, argues that it is a modern innovation to see ‘paying off one’s debts’ as ethically and socially desirable: pre-capitalist cultures would see a person who attempted never to be ‘in debt’ as effectively placing themselves outside the community, choosing instead to deal with others as strangers.

humility and gratitude to receive with equally good grace, recognising that one is *not* self-sufficient.

## VIRTUES OF ACKNOWLEDGED ECOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE

Might it be possible, then, to extend this framework to the ecological level, and identify ‘virtues of acknowledged *ecological* dependence’ whose exercise will tend to maintain the coherence and integrity of the natural environment, or at least of those features of it upon which we depend?

While our development into flourishing adult humans is unique to us, it is similar in kind to the development and flourishing of other social animals, particularly those closest to us, such as primates and other large mammals. Thomas Nagel (1979) may have been right that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat, but MacIntyre claims (1999: 58) that we do have at least some idea of what it is like to be a gorilla. All animals need food, warmth and shelter, and as infants or vulnerable adults we are dependent upon others, both for the provision of these necessities and for the maintenance of our place in the social structure which determines our access to them.

Beyond this though, there is also the matter of education into understanding the goods of the group. MacIntyre draws on studies of dolphin behaviour to show that humans do not have a monopoly on complex social structures, networks in which the individual has a place (ibid.: 21–28). The good of the group, and the nature of its complex relationship to the good of the individual, is not only something vital for flourishing in both species, but also something which must be learned – and which can only be learned by being taught. What constitutes flourishing for a dolphin, a gorilla, or a human will undoubtedly look different. There is nonetheless a common meaning, particularly since all three are social animals. Whether for individuals or for populations, evaluations of flourishing are made on the facts. Such evaluations certainly involve identifying characteristics of individuals, but remain incomplete without an understanding of the good both of the individual and of the group. These social

considerations are critical, not only for informing debates about how we should treat other animals, but for understanding ourselves.

There is, however, an even more fundamental similarity between humans and other animals, though MacIntyre deals with this only in passing. Whether an animal population can plausibly be said to be flourishing, and to have good prospects of continuing to do so, will depend not only upon the health of specific individuals, or of the group, but also on the integrity and resilience of the ecosystem(s) they inhabit. Despite our variety, we are all vulnerable physical creatures who flourish only in particular physical conditions.

Human adaptability is spectacular, but not unlimited. Our healthy development requires not just clean air and water, wholesome food, warmth and shelter: we also need a particular range of climatic conditions, albeit a relatively wide range compared to many other species. We also require the availability of certain elements and biochemical compounds, and the absence of others. We are dependent not only on other humans, nor only on the discrete species and natural resources of which we knowingly make instrumental use, but also on particular states of our ecological environment as a whole. These states can no longer be taken for granted, if indeed they ever could. The complex fabric of our interdependent relationships, which as MacIntyre shows is so crucial to the constitution of identity and the development of autonomous character, is woven not only from threads linking human individuals, but also, critically, from those linking each of us to the wider non-human world.

Consideration of other animals helps us to recognise the ramifications of the inescapable physicality of our existence as human beings. As living creatures, we exist not only as discrete individuals but also, and simultaneously, as nodes in ecological as well as social networks. If to be genuinely free is to be free to be oneself, then this must include the freedom to participate fully in those networks of which one is a part, be they social or ecological. The conditions required for a human individual to function as an autonomous 'subject of a life' must thus include the protection, maintenance and development of these networks.

To act autonomously, as discussed above, is not to act without reference to the interests of others, but to act in such a way as to express (and indeed endorse) one's unique individual character. This requires a reflective appreciation of one's dependency upon particular human beings, and upon social and communal structures. But it also requires acknowledgement of other relationships of dependence, ecological relationships which extend well beyond the boundary of our species. The suggestion here is that there may be a connection, or at least a compatibility, between the 'virtuous mean' conception of autonomy on the one hand, and the attitudes and dispositions towards the non-human world required for ecological sustainability on the other. Establishing this compatibility, though, will require a closer look at just what such 'ecological virtues' might be.

#### WHAT KIND OF PERSON...?

The application of virtue theory to environmental ethics is sometimes claimed to have begun with Thomas Hill's suggestion that understanding what is wrong with certain sorts of behaviour towards the nonhuman world requires a focus upon the qualities of the agent, rather than upon either the act itself, directly, or the consequences. In many cases, neither utilitarian arguments about balancing competing interests and maximising utility, nor deontological ones about rights and duties, seem to capture the essence of our 'moral uneasiness' (Hill, 2005: 49; see also Sandler, 2010). Instead, we need to ask questions like:

What kind of person ... would cover his garden with asphalt, strip-mine a wooded mountain, or level an irreplaceable redwood grove? (2005: 50)

Hill's answer is that such a person typically lacks 'that sort and degree of humility that is a morally admirable character trait' (ibid.: 59).

Geoffrey Frasz (1993) takes up this theme from a more explicit virtue theory perspective, focussing on the virtue of 'openness', which he defines in Aristotelian style as a mean between false modesty and arrogance. Someone possessing the virtue of openness is

neither someone who is closed off to the humbling effects of nature, nor someone who has lost all sense of individuality when confronted with the vastness and sublimity of nature. (Frasz, 1993: 279).

Frasz's formulation might be reframed more accurately in terms of *agency*, rather than individuality. While a temporary loss of individuality in such circumstances might sometimes be seen as appropriate, a loss of one's sense of agency, implying an abdication of the responsibility to develop one's own human virtues, could never really be so.

John Barry (1999: 31–36) broadly endorses this view that the principal relevant virtue is some version of humility. Barry suggests that the person 'closed off to the humbling effects of nature' is exhibiting what Ehrenfeld (1978) famously called 'the arrogance of humanism'. For Barry, however, it is the *arrogance*, not the humanism, which is the vice (1999: 31): ecocentrism is not the answer. Indeed, he identifies ecocentric 'deep ecology' positions with Frasz's opposite extreme, the loss of 'all sense of individuality', claiming that 'unreflective sentimental or romantic views of human-nature relations' (ibid.: 33) should also be seen as an ecological vice. The ecological virtue of humility is thus 'a mean between a timid ecocentrism and an arrogant anthropocentrism' (ibid.: 33). Barry goes on to argue (ibid.: 38–76) that this ecological virtue of humility can, in turn, ground an ethics of ecological stewardship (see Welchman, 1999) which, he says,

may be thought of as the cultivation of those modes of character and acting in the world which encourage social-environmental relations which are symbiotic rather than parasitic. (ibid.: 35)

For all these writers, possession and exercise of the relevant virtue(s) is seen not only as benefitting other people and the wider natural world, but also as important for the flourishing of the individual. As Barry (1999, 2012) points out, this is broadly congruent with MacIntyre's view of virtue and of the good life. For MacIntyre, as noted above, the exercise of the virtues of acknowledged dependence is important for the flourishing of the individual,

as well as tending to maintain the integrity of the community of which the individual is a part. Environmental virtue ethics extends this way of thinking beyond the human community, to consider character traits which tend to maintain the integrity of the natural world. Similarly to the virtues of interhuman dependence, with which MacIntyre is primarily concerned, these traits are beneficial for the individual as well, not only because such integrity is itself important for human flourishing, but also because our recognition and acknowledgement of our dependence upon it contribute to our understanding of our own identity.

## ECOLOGICAL VIRTUES, SUSTAINABILITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Louke van Wensveen's (2000) survey of eighteen influential environmentalist texts found mention of 189 virtues and 174 vices. These included many more or less colloquial usages of virtue language. Even within academic environmental virtue ethics, however, such lists can be long and unwieldy, confirming the intuition that some kind of overarching organising principle, based on the acknowledgement of ecological dependence, might be practically as well as conceptually helpful.

Sandler, for instance, offers a tabular 'typology of environmental virtue' (2007: 82), containing twenty-seven separate environmental virtues, subdivided into six categories. The 'virtues of sustainability' are listed as temperance, frugality, farsightedness, attunement and humility, while the 'virtues of respect for nature' are given as ecological sensitivity, care, compassion, nonmaleficence and restitutive justice.

Sandler understands the preservation of ecological sustainability to be primarily a matter of enlightened human self-interest (*ibid.*: 43–46). To this extent, he claims that the possession and exercise of the virtues of sustainability (as listed above) is necessary for human flourishing. After all, a fundamental prerequisite of flourishing as an individual human being is the availability of certain basic goods dictated by biological requirements: for instance, we all need wholesome food, clean water and sufficiently low levels of toxic pollution. It follows, therefore, that it is virtuous to maintain, and vicious to endanger, the availability of these basic goods.

But Sandler argues that the theoretical possibilities of somehow providing basic environmental goods by artificial means, or from a slowly degrading environment, make it impossible for basic goods arguments to justify ‘as longitudinal and robust a level of environmental concern as many would like’ (ibid.: 48). The argument that it is virtuous to ensure the continued availability of basic environmental goods can therefore only justify ‘virtues of *weak* sustainability’, these being

character traits that under most conditions (so long as there is not a sufficiently stable artificial alternative) dispose their possessor to maintain or promote a limited-term sustainability (one that extends for at least a few generations) at a weakly sustainable level (one concerned with the production of certain kinds of goods rather than with maintaining the multifarious bases for their production). (ibid.: 49)

This does indeed seem rather weak. If Sandler is right about this, then his prudential ‘virtues of sustainability’ turn out to have surprisingly little connection with the preservation of the integrity of natural systems. Taken in isolation, the fact that they are based on safeguarding the provision of *basic* environmental goods seems to render their practical implications hostage to the outcome of substitutability debates.

Sandler then recalls, however, that the nonhuman world provides us not only with basic goods but also aesthetic goods, recreational goods, and opportunities for physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual exercise and development (ibid.: 50). Dispositions ‘conducive to conserving these goods and opportunities’ should therefore also be seen as virtues, in addition to those pertaining to the preservation of more basic environmental goods. Furthermore, he argues, in order to properly recognise and enjoy these goods, people require the relevant character traits: the ‘virtues of communion with nature’, which include character traits such as receptivity, wonder, love and aesthetic sensibility (ibid.: 50, 82).

Here then is an argument for the inclusion as ecological virtues of character traits related to human beings’ aesthetic and emotional perceptions of the natural world, as well as those

related to the rational perspectives of environmental science. These virtues significantly strengthen the overall package. A person concerned to preserve the availability not only of basic goods but also of the more intangible experiential goods provided by the natural world, and possessing the sort of character traits needed to recognise and appreciate these (on which, see also James, 2013) will be a more effective defender of ecological sustainability. The implicit – but justified – assumption is that such goods are far harder, if not impossible, to find artificial substitutes for.

For Sandler, these virtues are still justified in prudential eudaimonist terms. While their possession and exercise is likely to have beneficial effects for nonhumans, and to be effective in preserving the integrity of ecosystems, they also contribute to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), and it is this which makes them virtues. By contrast, the ‘virtues of respect for nature’ (ecological sensitivity, care, compassion, nonmaleficence and restitutive justice) are justified in Sandler’s model in non-eudaimonist terms. That is, they are seen as virtuous because of their contribution to the flourishing of nonhumans, not because of any direct contribution to that of humans (*ibid.*: 72). A distinction is made between the ecological virtues of prudence and those of respect, where the former contribute to the flourishing of the human agent, and the latter to the flourishing of nonhumans.

For both theoretical and strategic reasons which lie largely beyond the scope of this paper, my own view is that Rosalind Hursthouse’s (1999, 2007) approach, which as discussed below justifies ecological virtues in purely eudaimonist terms, is preferable to Sandler’s hybrid version (see Thompson, 2008; McShane, 2008; Sandler, 2008), and also to James Connelly’s (2006) analogical or heuristic interpretation of ecological virtue. The theoretical reasons involve an intuition (for which I offer no argument here) that in principle, with sufficient attention to the value of the *relationships* between humans and the rest of the world, *all* the relevant virtues could be justified in eudaimonist terms as contributing to human flourishing. The strategic reasons relate to how to go about promoting and encouraging ecological virtue in the real world. Essentially, it will be much easier to promote ecologically sustainable behaviour on the basis that it leads to a better life, than as a worthy sacrifice for the sake of others.

## EXTRAPOLATION FROM ECOLOGICAL VICE

On this eudaimonist view, character traits associated with acknowledgement of the ecological embeddedness of human lives, and hence with the creation and maintenance of ecologically sustainable societies, are identified as virtues because the acknowledgement of ecological dependence is important for a flourishing life, and also an important part of making it possible for others to have such lives. As already noted, it can be hard to identify these traits at a manageable level of generality, without generating unwieldy lists or getting into complex issues of ethical theory.

But the investigation of ecological virtue is not just an abstract philosophical exercise. It proceeds from the very practical and urgent recognition that many of our current practices and social structures are detrimental to the integrity of natural systems, and thus (to this extent at least) are also detrimental to human flourishing. So, rather than trying to build up an idealised picture of a person as a paragon of ecological virtue, perhaps it makes sense to start from where we are, by identifying character traits which underlie and perpetuate these unsustainable practices and structures?

From a virtue theory perspective, such traits may be termed ecological vices, and consideration of these may help to identify the contrasting virtues. This approach also has the merit of bringing to the fore the importance of social influences on individuals' character. Philip Cafaro (2005: 147–150), for instance, considers the pernicious effects of greed, not only on greedy individuals themselves and on the societies in which they live, but also on natural systems: greed, he notes, is a driver of overconsumption, and thus of unnecessarily increased pressure on natural resources. He concludes:

In America, we are raised to be greedy. ... Advertising emphasises consumption as the primary means to happiness and works by increasing our dissatisfaction with life. ... Our colleges and universities teach applied avarice in their economics classes and business schools. ... We cannot eradicate the vices from human beings. However, there are practical steps we can take to limit greed and promote its contrasting virtues:

thrift, modesty, generosity and contentment. ... Taking these personal and political steps would be good for us and good for nature. (Cafaro, 2005: 150)

The observation that ‘thrift, modesty, generosity and contentment’ can all be considered ‘contrasting virtues’ to the vice of greed illustrates the complexities which quickly arise when virtue theory is applied to the real world. (This is, of course, not unique to virtue ethics: deontology and utilitarianism are at least as hard to operationalise.) It is nonetheless important to remember that here, as elsewhere, vices are not simply the polar opposites of the corresponding virtues. Broadly, while Cafaro is not explicit, it is clear that each of these potential virtues is intended here as a mean between the vice of greed, on the one hand, and a corresponding vice at the other end of a spectrum.

In all four cases, although there are subtle differences, the person possessing and exercising the relevant virtue strikes a virtuous mean between greed and some kind of excessive self-denial. The common thread is a mature and thoughtful relationship to wealth and possessions. Acknowledgement of ecological dependence is associated with, and indeed helps to develop, this reflective maturity. Such acknowledgement is an important part of developing a properly contextualised picture of the self and its place in the world. A person who has developed such a picture is arguably less likely to manifest that disposition towards unreflective and essentially unlimited acquisition of material goods which we recognise as the vice of greed.

The key ecological vice for Cafaro however is once again arrogance, which he defines as ‘an overvaluation of ourselves and a undervaluation of others’ (ibid.: 144). He notes, like Hill, that ‘arrogant indifference to nature and arrogant indifference to people often go together’. Arrogance is often cited as a key ecological vice, not only in explicitly virtue theoretical contexts, but also more broadly. Arrogance in this context is strongly and widely associated with ignorance, or denial, of the reality of ecological dependence (van Wensveen, 2000). As Frasz and Barry argue, there is a (less common) opposite vice characterised by a ‘loss of individuality’ (Frasz, 1993: 279) or a ‘quietism’ (Wissenburg, 1993; also quoted in Barry, 1999: 33). Between the two lies the virtuous mean identified by Barry and Hill as ‘proper humility’, which is associated with a reflective acknowledgement of ecological dependence,

and tends to ‘encourage social-environmental relations which are symbiotic rather than parasitic.’ (Barry, 1999: 35)

## ECOLOGICAL VIRTUE AND CONSUMERISM

One reason why this language of character, virtue and vice now seems old-fashioned is that the implicit value structures of modern consumerist societies have turned character traits previously thought of as vices into virtues. Lewis Mumford had already understood this in 1956:

Observe what has happened to the seven deadly sins of Christian theology. All but one of these sins, sloth, was transformed into a positive virtue. Greed, avarice, envy, gluttony, luxury and pride were the driving forces of the new economy: if once they were mainly the vices of the rich, they now under the doctrine of expanding wants embrace every class in [industrial] society. (Mumford, 1956; also quoted in Wenz, 2005: 205–6)

Recalling Mumford’s insight, Peter Wenz (2005) argues that consumerist society, importantly but not exclusively through advertising, fosters, encourages and indeed relies upon the prevalence of ‘traditional vices’, specifically pride, envy, greed, intemperance, selfishness and indifference. Given the ‘baleful’ effects of consumerism on both the environment and people, he argues, these traits should nonetheless still be considered vices: specifically, though not exclusively, as environmental vices. By contrast traditional virtues such as frugality, appreciation, temperance, self-development, dedication, generosity, empathy and benevolence tend to ‘inhibit the consumerism that impairs human flourishing and degrades the environment’ (Wenz, 2005: 207).

MacIntyre also has consumerism in his sights, and makes clear that it is detrimental to the relationships which the virtues of acknowledged dependence help to build and maintain. He observes that

economic considerations will have to be subordinated to social and moral considerations, if a local community that is a network of giving and receiving is to survive, let alone thrive. ... [T]rying to live by Utopian standards is not Utopian, although it does involve a rejection of the economic goals of advanced capitalism. For the institutional forms through which such a way of life is realised, although economically various, have this in common: they do not promote economic growth and they require some significant degree of insulation from and protection from the forces generated by outside markets. Most importantly, such a society will be inimical to and in conflict with the goals of a consumer society. (MacIntyre, 1999: 145)

## THE VIRTUE OF RIGHT ORIENTATION TO NATURE

Should it then be concluded that the virtues of acknowledged ecological dependence can in fact be entirely reinterpreted as instances of those traditional virtues, such as frugality, humility and temperance, which stand in opposition to the values underlying environmentally destructive consumerist societies? Strong arguments can indeed be made that (re)embracing such traditional virtues would go a long way toward reorientating human societies towards ecological sustainability. But in seeking to identify virtues of acknowledged ecological dependence, might it not be important to look for virtues more specifically concerned with our actions and attitudes toward the nonhuman world?

Rosalind Hursthouse (2007) argues that a 'new' virtue is indeed needed, which she terms 'right orientation to nature'. Claiming that reinterpreting and extending the scope of traditional virtues will not be sufficient, she proceeds to reconstruct Paul Taylor's (1986) influential concept of *respect* for nature as the *virtue* of 'right orientation to nature'. Respect for nature, she says, cannot simply be 'adopted', but requires inculcation and continued practice.

One important aspect of her reinterpretation of Taylor is her departure from his idea that respect is simply due to things with a *telos*. In Taylor's 'biocentric deontological' picture

(Hursthouse 2007: 165), the ethical rationale for urging respect for nature rests on the attribution of ‘inherent worth’ to living things.<sup>3</sup> For Taylor, the fact that living things have a *telos* or ‘a good of their own’ means that they are ‘members of the Earth’s Community of Life’ (Taylor, 1986: 44), and this in turn means that like humans, they are entitled to respect, in a Kantian sense of entitlement to being treated always as ends rather than as mere means. Thus, again like humans, they should be treated as having ‘inherent worth’. This is also, broadly speaking, the view taken by Sandler.

Hursthouse points out (2007: 165–6) that (among other problems) such a view cannot justify respect for ‘inanimate nature’, such as mountains, oceans, and ecosystems. One potential way of dealing with this problem is to move to a ‘deep ecology’ perspective (e.g. Naess, 1989), which would extend the notions of teleology and intrinsic value to encompass mountains, oceans, ecosystems and so forth. Hursthouse argues, however, that intrinsic value is best seen from a virtue ethics perspective as a colloquial concept, not a foundational theoretical commitment. As such, it is useful and appropriate as a heuristic tool, for instance in the ‘training of children in reasons for action and emotional responses’ (Hursthouse, 2007: 165), but is not necessary or useful in the normative justification of respect for nature. Respect for nature (or as Hursthouse prefers, right orientation to nature) is thus reconceived to include not only respect for living things, but also for (at least some) inanimate natural features and phenomena, and for the integrity of whole natural systems themselves, including both their animate and inanimate elements. This is justified, essentially, not on the basis of respect for the *telos* of living things, but on the eudaimonist basis that a life characterised by a right orientation to nature will be a more flourishing one.

## ORIENTATION, RELATIONSHIPS, AND EXEMPLARS

Hursthouse’s argument that the ecological virtues will be incompletely specified if the package does not include a *specific* virtue along the lines of her ‘right orientation to nature’ is a persuasive one. Older ‘anticonsumerist’ virtues such as temperance and frugality should also be included, but these do not capture the full picture. The notion of *orientation* is

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor’s usage here is broadly equivalent for these purposes to what is more commonly called ‘intrinsic value’ – for an examination of the distinctions between such phrases in this field, see Stephens, 2000.

important in itself, because it facilitates a closer focus on the *relationships* between human and nonhuman worlds. In considering ecological virtue we are certainly, in Hill's words, interested in 'what kind of person': but we are as interested in the person's interdependencies and relationships as in their purely internal qualities. As Noel Castree points out, the complex relationship between human and nonhuman is itself a dynamic one, meaning that

the relationally constituted, and situationally variable, members of any ethical constituency cannot be ontologically fixed once and for all. (Castree, 2003: 10)

A virtue approach is arguably better equipped to handle this challenge than other, monistic forms of environmental ethics. But a critical part of being so equipped is to retain the focus on relationship.

None of this, of course, tells us very much about what it would mean in practice to be rightly oriented to nature. Hursthouse is somewhat pessimistic about the prospects of knowing this, suggesting that while 'the very next generation may start to show us the way', nonetheless

[i]t is possible that we have already made such a mess that we shall not be able to live well, as part of the natural world, for many generations to come, if ever. (Hursthouse, 2007: 170)

Part of this pessimism comes from her conviction that modern cultures lack exemplars or *phronimoi*: wise people from whom we might learn *what it is* to live in accordance with the virtue of being rightly oriented to nature. She is pessimistic in particular about the idea that we can learn any of this from surviving representatives of pre-consumerist cultures. This, I think, is overstated. It is still entirely possible to learn about different ways of relating to the nonhuman world from peoples who are not yet conditioned into modern consumerist relationships with nature, and who have in many cases long been engaged in resisting such conditioning. Anthropologists, and others who can observe and *listen* (see Dobson 2012) while avoiding romanticisation and projection, know that there is still a great wealth of intangible as well as tangible knowledge to be gathered on this subject. Writers such as Tim

Ingold (2000) have shown at length how much there is to be learnt from indigenous societies about what it is to deeply know and inhabit an environment. Appreciating different orientations toward nature need not require seeking out isolated cultures living in mythical pristine environments, nor need it involve copying specific practices. As Brian Treanor (2104: 177) points out, what is required is imaginative projection rather than imitation: the question is not ‘what would the *phronimos* do’ but ‘what would I do if I were like the *phronimos*, if I had the virtue in question, as they do’. Moreover, there may of course be relevant exemplars much closer to home.

## CONCLUSIONS

Arrogance, then, can be seen both as a vice contrasting with the virtue of autonomy, and as a key vice contrasting with ecological virtue. This already suggests a connection between the corresponding virtues. The phrase used by Benson to describe the vice of excessive autonomy, *arrogant self-sufficiency*, seems equally apt as a description of the ecological vice which Barry calls a deficiency of humility and Hursthouse might term a ‘mistaken orientation to nature’. In both cases, the person fails to properly acknowledge, appreciate and act on their connectedness and essential interdependence: in one case, with their fellow humans, and in the other, with the nonhuman world.

The opposite vices in the two cases maintain this parallel. Benson characterises the deficiency of autonomy as a matter of being *too* dependent, leading to a failure or inability to trust one’s own judgement. The corresponding (though rarely seen) ecological vice of excessive humility represents, in Hursthouse’s terms, another failure to achieve a right orientation to nature. Again, the true nature and extent of one’s relationships of dependence and interdependence is not properly appreciated. This time, though, the failure is an undue *overestimation* of dependence, leading a person to, in Frasz’s terms, ‘los[e] all sense of individuality when confronted by the vastness and sublimity of nature’ (1993: 279).

Ecological virtue and the virtue of autonomy both require a proper understanding of the complex dependencies and interdependencies involved in human life and agency. In both

cases, as MacIntyre puts it, ‘acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence’ (1999: 85). The virtuous person will neither over- nor under-estimate their dependency. They will instead learn to understand and acknowledge the interconnected reality of their situation, then act with just generosity on the basis of that reality. This is not an easy, quick or well-defined learning process, nor one that need be undergone only once. The webs of our relationships, connections and dependencies are always shifting: both virtues therefore necessarily involve a continual dynamic process of observation, reflection and adjustment.

The acknowledgement of *ecological* dependence, and the cultivation of the relevant virtues, is for urgent practical reasons a critically important part of this process. More abstractly, the understanding that this is the case is also important in its own right. If our conception of autonomy, and thus of freedom, is developed without due regard to the ecological limits revealed by such acknowledgement, then we risk trapping ourselves into believing that we are not, and can never be, free. As Robyn Eckersley (2006) puts it, we should see sustainability as a condition for autonomy, not as a constraint on it.

Ecological virtue, on this reading, is in a very real sense its own reward: it need not be ‘sold’ as a worthy sacrifice. This suggests a potential for such ecological eudaimonism to usefully inform real-world policy-making and communications strategies. This, however, would require the language of ecological virtue to be deployed as genuine moral discourse, rather than as just another rhetorical device. Those deploying it would need to understand the difference. This raises many questions that go well beyond the scope of this paper, of which I conclude by mentioning just two. Firstly, sincere promotion of ecological virtue is unlikely to be possible within a framework of neutrality between conceptions of the good life (Hannis, 2005, 2015). Secondly, public bodies would surely need to exemplify ecological virtue in their own actions, policies and communications, if they were to be taken seriously in demanding it of individuals.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This paper has benefitted considerably from discussions with John O’Neill, Andy Dobson, two generous reviewers for this journal, and participants at conferences of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry (University of Nottingham, 2012) and the International Society for Environmental Ethics (UEA, Norwich, 2013). Bringing it to completion and publication has been generously facilitated by AHRC grant AH/K005871/2.

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