

CHAPTER 4

Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole

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Nature and Character

“Know thyself.” “The unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ Socrates’ classic wisdom invites us to figure out who we are. But there is complexity beguiled by these seemingly simple maxims. On an elemental level, we often gain lessons in encounters with nature, with nonself. Confronting our surroundings and sources integrates us, protects us from pride, gives a sense of proportion and place, and teaches us what to expect and what to be content with. Living well involves catching certain natural rhythms. We learn humility, simplicity, frugality, serenity, freedom, and self-confidence. These virtues are neither modern nor postmodern; they are perennial and universally available.

Folk wisdom is routinely cast in this natural idiom. The farmer urges, “Work, for the night comes when man’s work is done.” “Make hay while the sun shines.” “What you sow, you reap.” “Into each life some rain must fall.” “All sunshine makes a desert.” “By their fruits shall you know them.” “The early bird gets the worm.” “The loveliest rose has yet its thorns.” “The tree stands that bends with the wind.” “Every mile is two in winter.” “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?” The mariner says: “Time and tide wait for no man.” “The north wind made the Vikings.”

The sage in Proverbs admonishes the sluggard to consider the ways of the ant and be wise. The psalmist notices how we are like grass that flourishes but is soon gone, and those who understand the “seasonal” character of life are better able to rejoice in the turning of the seasons and to do everything well in its time. Jesus asks us, in our search for the goods of life, to consider the natural beauty of the lilies of the field, which the affected glory of Solomon could not surpass; and he points out birds, who, although hardly lazy, are not anxious or worried about tomorrow. Often, major religious seasons are naturally scheduled: Christmas comes at the winter solstice; Easter, with the bursting forth of spring; and Thanksgiving, with the harvest.

An inclusive moral virtue, well-rounded excellence of character, comes in significant part, although by no means in the whole, from this natural attunement. Here living well requires that we be properly sensitive to the flow of nature through us and its

bearing on our habits of life. Otherwise, life lacks propriety; we do not know our place under the sun.

We need caution. Human virtues are multileveled. That nature builds character is but half the truth and absurd if taken for the whole. That would omit all the civic virtues, without which we could not be human. Character is developed in a dialectic of nature and culture. "Man is by nature a political animal."² Humans are animals who build themselves a polis, a city, and love to socialize within it. "Man is the animal for whom it is natural to be artificial."³ *Homo sapiens* is "the natural alien."⁴ What humans "naturally" do when they encounter nature is build a culture differentiating (alienating) ourselves from nature. Agriculture, business, and industry are our real vocation. Virtue has to be "cultivated," "cultured." Living with wild nature in nostalgic simplicity and frugality, these "humanists" will say, is romantic nonsense that forgets how much the human genius lies in exodus from and resourceful transformation of nature. The modern word for this is "Develop!"

In this human genius, humanizing our lives on Earth, nature is not to be praised. Nature only serves as an occasion for the construction of human virtues; the natural wisdom I was alleging earlier only reveals the virtues that develop in humans when we confront nature. We resourcefully take advantage of nature when it serves; we rebuild nature when it opposes us, an opportunist surmounting of nature in which successful humans exhibit remarkable powers. If we are to be human, then we have to distinguish ourselves from nature. Development and culture just *are* the human relationship with nature. We inhabit culture within nature, bracketing ourselves off from wild nature with an insulating culture. In doing this we demonstrate our excellences.

But this anthropocentric account of the nature–culture encounter is too one-sided. Evolution and ecology have taught us that every kind of life is what it is environmentally, in its surroundings, not autonomously. Humans too are environmental reciprocals, indebted to our environment for what we have become in ways that are complementary as they are oppositional. Dialectically, the character is achieved within us, but the context is relational. Nature is not sufficient to produce these virtues, but it is necessary for them. With our evolved hands and brains, humans are realizing in the strong and good life something of the strength and goodness that nature has disciplined into its creatures and is bequeathing to us. In our cultural genius, nature remains in, with, and under us, a womb that we never really leave.

Further, in these cultures that we develop, the humanists will say (and correctly so), nature gives no ethical guidance for interhuman affairs. The virtues of culture are not present there. Nowhere in wild nature does one learn to keep promises, or to tell the truth, or to respect property and not steal, or to seek the greatest good for the greatest number, or to be just and charitable, or to forgive sins. So there does seem to be force in the claim that human virtues much transcend any elemental harmony with wild nature.

Nevertheless, human conduct must also be an appropriate form of life toward our environment, toward what the world offers us. Build cultures and cultivate our moral lives though we may, none of us is wise who does not ultimately make peace with the natural order. Wallace Stegner epitomizes this memorably:

Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forest to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste. And so that never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it. . . .

We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in, for it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.⁵

So, for the sake of our own identities, of being who we are where we are, of being at home in the world, we need to maintain the integrities of the fauna and flora on our landscapes. Else we will become strangers to our places; we will be misfits, upsetting residents. We reach the truth that we are embodied persons. But this embodiment in place is entwining the character of the inner self with the character of the outer, natural world, that is, relocating, dislocating the virtues of the self, putting the self in its place.

Virtuous Persons Embodied in Their Places

“Life in an unexamined world is not worth living either.” With this more inclusive maxim, I claim to be wiser than Socrates. Yes, the unexamined life is not worth living, but I disagree with Socrates’ avoidance of nature, thinking it profitless: “You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won’t teach me anything, and the people in the city do.”⁶ Walt Whitman has quite the opposite conviction:

Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth.⁷

A rural New Yorker reflected over his environment, in late November, with a strong sense of satisfactory residence:

The wind sweeps out of the west, with the faint breath of blizzard far away; but the skies are clear, without even the shredded, high-flying clouds of storm. And so November leans toward December, and late autumn creeps past, silent as the stars. The hush of winter approaches, and short days lie upon the land. Now is the time that the countryman has the country to himself. The visitors are gone, vacations over. Even the migrant birds are gone. The squirrels go quietly about their business. And a man has time to survey his world and understand his own place in it, if he is ever to understand.

Now it becomes clear that it isn't the little pleasures of the country that make life worth living there. It is rather the big assurances. The little pleasures are for the casual visitor; but one must live with the wind and the weather and know the land and the seasons to find the certainties. The flash of a goldfinch or the song of an oriole can delight the senses; but the knowledge that no matter how sharp or long the winter, they will be back again for another spring provides an inner surety. To see a hillside white with dogwood bloom is to know a particular ecstasy of beauty; but to walk the gray winter woods and find the buds which will resurrect that beauty in another May is to partake of continuity. To feel the frost underfoot and know that there is both fire and ice in the earth, even as in the patterned stars overhead, is to sense the big assurances.

Man needs to know these things, and they are best learned when the silence lies upon the land. No one can shout them. They need to be whispered, that they may reach the questing soul.⁸

Now we are recognizing how persons cannot be human if displaced but, rather, must be resident in their local environments. Here they sense the recurrent universals particularly displayed in that place—the seasons, the regenerative powers of life, life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing; the “big assurances.” A person in his or her biography—as much as an ecologist with a field grid, a geneticist with a breeding experiment, a taxonomist with a type species, or a mathematician with a set of algebraic equations—is a detection device for catching something of the richness and integrity of what is taking place on the landscape.

This results in human virtues but simultaneously takes the focus off the self. Virtue cannot be self-contained but must be in place, and now the integrity of place—as much as the integrity of persons resonating with their places—is what is really impressive. Nature is a vast scene of birth and death, springtime and harvest, permanence and change; of budding, flowering, fruiting, and withering away; of processive unfolding; of pain and pleasure; of success and failure; of ugliness giving way to beauty and beauty to ugliness. From the contemplation of it we get a feeling for life's transient beauty sustained over chaos. There is a music to it all—and not the least when in a minor key. Though we are required to spend our lives in struggle, yet we are able to cherish the good Earth and accept the kind of world in which we find ourselves. We are finding out who we are by finding out where we are and how we are emplaced there.

The dialectic between environmental resistance and conductance continues. Certainly, there is struggle in nature. But there is also, and even more, adaptedness. There is resistance to life, but there is support of life. The account that the examined life reaches when examining the world contains both elements—and not merely as a non-sensical mixture of goods and evils. One discovers a nature where the evils are tributary to the goods, “a table prepared in the midst of my enemies.”⁹ It is not death but, rather, life, including human life fitted to this planetary environment, that is the principal mystery that has come out of nature. For several billion years, the ongoing development and persistence of that life, reaching the most complex achievements yet known in human life, have been the persistent features of nature behind which the element of struggle is contained as a subtheme. Our conduct ought to fit this natural life story.

We must anxiously preserve a discontinuity between the organism and physical nature, between the self and its resident world. The centripetal self maintains its integrity against a centrifugal wildness. Each species, each individual, sets a boundary between itself and the rest of nature, and in humans that discontinuity is enormously greater than elsewhere. This spirited agency is the distinctly human genius, the human virtue, wrested from nature; and, except as we insist otherwise, the accidents of external nature will destroy it. We maintain our being by being over against nature. We delight in personal narrative as we learn to travel through the world. This is the elation of auto/biography.

The pilgrim, the settler, the explorer—all were admired for their prowess against their environment. The wild continent was tamed; forests, cleared; roads, built; rivers, bridged—and often in the name of religion, for the Judeo-Christian faith urged conquering nature and redeeming the fallen world. Scientists and engineers, physicians and farmers, as they have conquered famines, sickness, and natural disasters, remain heir to this hope of gaining security by overcoming a threatening nature. The primary virtue here is a resolute courage. The sagas of the pioneers are spine-tingling, and in scouting or Outward Bound our youth still seek the outdoor experience as bracing and even challenging. An early and provident fear of nature is felt by all roused to work for shelter or to prevent hunger, by all wary of natural hazards, by all who button up before winter. The ego boundary must also be maintained in competition and cooperation with other human selves in the social world. But this is always within the fundamental tension of the human self against the natural world. Humans too live in Darwin's world, with a struggle for survival, for adapted fit. But the human genius is an exodus from natural selection into cultural prowess.

Still, our homes are cultural places in their construction, but there is always a natural foundation, a sense of belongingness to the landscape. For all those boundaries that we defend against the external world, our virtues are not confined to those of maintaining our separateness. The American settlers found that they had no sooner conquered a wilderness than they had come to love a land. Theirs was a promised land, even though they fought for it—nor are these biblical allusions incidental. After the conquest, there was time to rejoice in the sunshine and the rain, in seedtime and harvest, in peaks and prairies, in the orchard in bloom, in the smell of the newly mown hay.

We flourish with our landscapes, with trees and grass, flowers and gardens, lakes and sky. We cherish our hills of home, our rivers, our bays, and our country drives. Most of us identify so with some countryside that we get a lump in the throat when we must leave it or when we return after an absence. We have deep affections toward persons and communities, but our affections toward the city, *per se*, are often exceeded by those that we have toward the landscape. The notion of evolved fittedness includes congeniality, as well as opposition, but Darwin never quite said this. Nature is not a home ready at hand, and we must live in our built environments, urban and rural. Our virtues defend the organic self, but they also stretch it out to integrate it into its place.

In an analysis of the autobiographies of 300 geniuses, Edith Cobb concludes that they characteristically recall from their middle childhood a period “when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of

some profound continuity with natural processes.” It is to this encounter that, in the creativity of their adult years,

these writers say they return in memory in order to renew the power and impulse to create at its very source, a source which they describe as the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness but into a living sense of dynamic relationship with the outer world. In these memories the child appears to experience both a sense of discontinuity, an awareness of his own unique separateness and identity, and also a continuity, a renewal of relationship with nature as process.¹⁰

The child is exalted by a rediscovery of those powers of autonomous agency in which the race has evolved, but the dominant impulse is a sense of immanence in the natural process, more relational than oppositional. To finger a stick, to throw rocks into the creek, to build a fire, to run with a dog across a field, to watch the sparrows—all awaken a sense of wonder at both the natural drama and the part the person is permitted to play in it. Nature is a foil for the self, yet so diversely so across the many cultures and centuries of these geniuses that human virtues are forged in environmental reciprocity. In Hegelian terms, the person is an evolutionary thesis of nature, set in antithesis to it and yet drawn toward synthesis with it.

In his autobiography, Carl Jung recalls being gripped in early childhood by the large stones in his family garden and returning there to regain those emotions in his adult years. With advancing age, he developed an intricate symbolic relationship with the stone “Tower,” a rustic house that he himself built by stages on the scenic upper lake of Zurich. In this rural place, he writes,

I am in the midst of my true life, I am most deeply myself. . . . At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. There is nothing in the Tower that has not grown into its own form over the decades, nothing with which I am not linked. . . . Silence surrounds me almost audibly, and I live “in modest harmony with nature.” . . .

There is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about, myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things.¹¹

The myth of Antaeus is true: man is an invincible wrestler but loses his strength if he takes both feet from his mother earth. Adam lost his Eden when he spurned it and fell into labor and pain. Human virtues lie in defending the self, aloft and transcendent over nature, but they also lie in fitting ourselves into the natural environment that transcends us. If we wish to call this an *environmental* virtue ethics, then we have to recognize that any such virtues, lodged in humans, require for these humans to be well placed in their worlds. The better name for such an ethic might be an *ecological* virtue ethics, for human virtues of this kind always require an ecology. Inevitably, we both defend our lives and find our places. In that sense, insofar as we flourish, these are virtues that we all live by. But they are virtues that some of us live for—they give significance to life.

Selves Caring for Others

“Know thyself.” To Socrates again, I have a reply: “Know others.” Virtues must be extended not only to caring for integrity of place but further, to caring for others in those places. On the positive side, an admirable trait in many persons is their capacity to appreciate things outside themselves, things that have no economic, medical, or industrial uses, perhaps even no recreational, aesthetic, or scientific value. An interest in natural history ennobles persons. It stretches them out into bigger persons. Humans must inevitably be consumers of nature; but they can and ought sometimes be more: admirers of nature. That redounds to their excellence. One condition of human flourishing is that humans enjoy natural things in as much diversity as possible—and enjoy them at times because such creatures flourish in themselves.

On the negative side, there is something small-spirited about the inveterate exploiter of nature. There is always something wrong with callous destruction. Vandals destroying art objects also ruin their own character. Americans are ashamed at having destroyed the passenger pigeon and the vast buffalo herds. Greatly imperiled today are the American native fish; about 70 percent of endangered and threatened fish species worldwide are in North America.¹² This is especially true of fish in the U.S. West, which are much jeopardized by dams, irrigation, water development, and pollution. The Endangered Species Committee of the Desert Fishes Council has identified 164 fish species in North American deserts that are endangered, vulnerable, or rare; eighteen have already become extinct.¹³

Americans should be ashamed if they destroy these desert fish; they are more excellent persons if they conserve them. Destruction of these desert fish is “uncalled for.” Short of overriding justifications, humans really ought to save these native fish—including those species from which we can gain no conceivable economic, ecological, aesthetic, recreational, scientific, educational, historical, or other benefits. Humans of decent character will refrain from needless destruction of all kinds, including the destruction of even “unimportant” species. We can always gain excellence of character from acts of conservation. We have a duty to our higher selves to save these fish.

A human virtue is generated, actualizing a uniquely human capacity and possibility for excellence, when a person respects a wild animal’s life for what that life is in itself, a different and yet related form of life. This triggers awareness of otherness and feeds back into our own sense of identity and integrity. So we are figuring out who we are as a consequence of figuring out who they are. We do realize something special about our own capacities. We can reflect on the manifest destiny of humans on Earth, on our human overtaking of the North American continent, and on the (perhaps inevitable) tragedy of the displaced wildlife and fish, if also now the open possibility of preserving some space on our landscape for the greatly displaced native fauna. We can be altruistic toward the fish and take care to conserve runs on our rivers where these fish can swim free there again, as they did for millennia before Europeans came. The fish, of course, have no analogous possibilities of being altruistic toward humans or of appropriately respecting the otherness of the human form of life, with its cultural developments.

Humans are unique and superior in their cognitive, critical, and ethical capacities; they are Earth's "overseers"—they see over the whole as no other species does. But their superiority is linked in a feedback loop with the whole; they realize their oversight only with care and concern for the Earth, for the fauna and flora on the planet on which they reside, and for the whole biotic community. We can care for the fish; they cannot care for us. And we realize our excellence in caring for these species that we have put into jeopardy.

But why is callous destruction of desert fish "uncalled for," if not because there is something in the fish that calls for a more appropriate attitude? Excellence of human character does indeed result from a concern for these fish, but if this excellence of character really comes from appreciating otherness, then why not value that otherness in wild nature first? Let the human virtue come tributary to that. It is hard to gain much excellence of character from appreciating an otherwise worthless thing. One does not gain much nobility just from respecting curios. To prohibit the needless destruction of fish species seems to depend on some value in the species as such, for there need be no prohibition against destroying a valueless thing. The excellence of human character depends on a sensitivity to excellence in these marvelous fish flourishing in the desert.

The human mind grows toward the realization of its possibilities (excellences) by appropriate respect for nature (fish), but that respect is the end and the growth is the by-product. It is even true that realizing this excellent humanity in *Homo sapiens* is a greater value than the flourishing of fish life in *Cyprinodon diabolis*, but the realizing of excellent humanity here is exactly the *expansion* of human life into a concern for fish life for what it is in itself, beyond concern for utility, resource conservation, or self-development. Here humans are higher than fish only as and because humans, moving outside their own immediate sector of interest, can and ought to be morally concerned for fish, whereas fish have no moral capacities at all. Fish can neither cognitively entertain a concept of humans nor evaluate the worth of humans. What *higher* means here is having the capacity to be concerned for the "lower." Humans are subjectively enriched in their experience as and because they love the other, nonhuman species for what they objectively are.

This caring needs to be elicited by the properties of what is cared for. Will anything do as an object of my caring, just so long as my caring for it builds my character? No, the virtue appearing in the caregiver must have some appropriate connection with value in what is cared for. There needs to be something worthwhile out there that excites my admiration. On some occasions, I might be even more virtuous for loving worthless things—as is claimed when saints love sinners despite what they are, not because of what they are. But even here the sinner is made in the image of God, destroyed though that image now is, and the saint believes that the sinner can be regenerated.

We may say, before callous destruction of passenger pigeons, bison, or desert fish: "No *self-respecting* person would do that." Yes, but the reason is that my *respect for the other*, which ought to be realized and respected within myself, is diminished, not that my self-respect per se has tarnished. It is virtuous to recognize the rights of other persons, but the motivating force is their rights that I appreciate, not my self-respect. With the fish in jeopardy, we should care for a form of life that has an intrinsic value; this places some claim on the humans inhabiting the U.S. West. The motivation for acting

with concern for the other cannot be based simply on the consequences for me of caring for the other.

Now we worry that the person embodied in his or her resident environment is but half the truth. I care about the fish in the West where I reside, but many areas that I wish to preserve have nothing to do with my sense of place. I want to save mountain gorillas but have only seen wild gorillas in Uganda two days in my life. I want to save Antarctica and have only been there once; nobody lives there. I wish to save the vestimentiferans living at the deep ocean hydrothermal vents, but these are no part of my experienced nature. The world is a plural place. I am no doubt a resident of Earth, but I am not a resident of most environments on Earth. Most of these others, both other persons and other animals and plants, I do not encounter at all, although I have some knowledge that they are there and often in jeopardy. So I contribute to an African mission hospital and join the Worldwide Fund for Nature. Is this because of my search for personal virtue?

Human Virtue and Intrinsic Natural Value

A human virtue, in the current meaning of the term, is an admirable human characteristic acquired by reason and will. Gaining virtue will be assisted of course by upbringing and community encouragements; nor is it possible without genetic endowments. But virtues are achievements, not endowments. In this sense, perfect pitch, though an admirable trait, is not a virtue. Virtues are acquired excellences.¹⁴ This is one reason why any concept of animal virtue is difficult. Animal excellences are largely genetic endowments; we are uncertain how much (if at all) the dominant wolf has his position by praiseworthy effort. A preferable term is animal (and plant) *values*, evolutionary and genetic achievements that are embodied in these organisms. The individual organism inherits such skills, coded in the genotype and displayed in the phenotype. We admire and respect such lives, among the marvels on Earth.

To a limited extent, especially with the higher animals, we can also wonder about the acquired achievements of an individual within its own lifetime, although, lacking access to their psychology and restricted by quite limited encounters with wild lives, we are often uncertain how much of this achievement is related to an individual's resolution, endurance, courage, or animal "virtue." We are likely to be more persuaded about such "virtues" with our pet dogs, possibly also with wolves, but rather skeptical about their existence in fish and rather sure that they are not present in butterflies.

Environmental virtues, as achieved by humans, will initially involve concern for human quality of life. But our deeper ethical achievement needs to focus on values as intrinsic achievements in wild nature. These virtues within us need to attend to values without us. Perhaps one starts with a love of nature that is tributary to self-love. Later one discovers that this self-love is quite inclusive, for the health of myriad nonhumans is implicated, entwined with ours. One is called to an active concern and positive engagement with the object of encounter. The other cannot be seen simply as a source of personal transformation. We must make the model at least an ellipse with two foci: human virtue and natural value.

Environmental virtue ethicists may reply that they quite agree. An environmental virtue ethic that has as its primary focus human self-development is immature. A more mature ethic takes value in nature as an essential focus: "In an environmental virtue ethics, human excellence and nature's excellence are necessarily entwined"; "an environmental virtue ethics may start from a concern for human interests, but it cannot remain there."¹⁵ To be truly virtuous one must respect values in nature for their own sake and not as tributary to human flourishing. But if indeed intrinsic value in nature has become primary to the ethic, to call such an ethic a (human) environmental virtue ethics is no longer an adequately descriptive title. The virtue ethic is only a "start-up ethic," which can only get us halfway there. The better name would be an environmental value/virtue ethic, keeping both foci of the ellipse prominent.

My worry is that if an environmental virtue ethics is unable to disentwine human virtues from intrinsic values in nature, whether in practice or in principle, the glass remains half full and never fills up. The reason may be that there is a leak in the bottom as well. The full ethic affirms these intrinsic values in nature out there quite independent of their human entwinement. Maybe the cart is hooked up to the horse, but the horse has to go before the cart, not the cart before the horse. No, that is a misleading analogy, the virtuous may reply. Half a loaf is better than none. Virtue ethics can get you half the loaf, even if not the full loaf. But if we are appealing to proverbs, recall also the reply: half a horse is worse than no horse at all. Half this ethic might be less vital than we realize.

A more promising vocabulary is that of "integrity," for *integrity* can suggest being integrated within as well as integrated without. Humans, animals, and plants can all be said to have their "integrity," although the single term hides radical differences in their kinds of integrity. "Welfare" is also an inclusive category, for well-being is both within the self and without in wild lives. Recalling etymological roots, this focus on what is one's own (*proprium*) is improper if it does not equally keep in sight the goods proper to, owned by, others. These species have been around for millions of years. And why save them? It makes *me* a better person. My quality of life is entwined with theirs. But that confuses the by-product with the located focus of value. The wild other does not become valuable if and when it results in something valuable for me. It is valuable for what it is, whether I am around or not, and recognizing that value does valuable things to me. Such an ethic is best called a value-based ethic, not a virtue-based ethic.

Excellence is intrinsically a good state for the self, but there are various intrinsic goods that the self desires and pursues in its relation to others that are not "self states" of the person who is desiring and pursuing: the welfare of other humans or of desert fish. The preservation of the fish is not covertly the cultivation of human excellences; the lives of these fish in the desert is the overt value defended. An enriched humanity results, with values in the fish and values in persons compounded—but only if the loci of value are not confounded. Environmental virtue ethics, taken for the whole, is a misplaced ethic, a displaced ethic. It seems unexcellent—cheap and philistine—to say that excellence of human character is what we are after when we preserve these endangered species. We want virtue in the human beholder that recognizes value in the endangered species. Excellence of human character does indeed result, but let the human virtue cherish the value found in nature.

In another version of this argument, humans ought to preserve an environment adequate to match their capacity to wonder. Human life is often routine and boring, especially in town and on the job, and the great outdoors stimulates wonder that enriches human life. The desert evokes the sense of the sublime, and these curious desert fish can certainly serve as objects of wonder. We have a duty to our higher selves to keep life wonderful. But if the excellence of character really comes from appreciating something wonderful, then why not directly attach value to this other? If a person were to make a large donation to the Desert Fishes Council and, being asked what motivated his charity, replied that he enjoyed now and again an experience of wonder when he (rather rarely) actually saw rare fish, we should rightly react that, using the fish to enrich his experience, he does not yet genuinely care for them.

Virtue ethicists will caution that some seeming virtues can be appearances. For example, what if I give to a charity calculating how much I must donate to purchase a desired increase in my public reputation? My sought-for status does not match my inner intent. But what if I give to a charity knowing within myself that it is the right thing to do? I want to be that kind of person; and, what if, after the gift, I feel good about myself and I think of myself as a better person for what I have done? We do not expect one to feel bad about oneself if one also believes that one has done the right thing. Am I doing good in order to feel good about it?

This ancient Socratic puzzle, “No evil can come to a good man,” is still a puzzle in contemporary psychology, where it is difficult to isolate disinterested helping of others (altruism) from the personal rewards of so doing, as well as which explanatory level is most significant in human moral behavior, both ideal and real.¹⁶ Socrates seems to have argued that the personal benefits from doing the right always left the good person better off, more virtuous. But if that becomes the good person’s motive, is one acting in self-interest or in the interests of others? If when we do the right, the two are always inseparable, then we cannot act selflessly. But surely we often can and ought to be concerned for others in independence of our own gain?

One does indeed want to keep life wonderful, but the logic is topsy-turvy if we only value the *experience* of wonder and not the *objects* of that wonder. Merely valuing the experience commits a fallacy of misplaced wonder; it puts the virtue in the beholder, not in the species beheld. Earth’s five to ten million species are among the marvels of the Universe, and fish tenaciously speciating in the desert are exceptional even on Earth. Valuing species and speciation directly, however, seems to attach value to the long-standing evolutionary products and process (the wonders, the wonderland), not merely to subjective experiences that arise when late-coming humans reflect over events (the felt wonder).

Evolutionary development in these fish runs to quantitative extremes, and human awareness of this can enrich our quality of life. But what is objectively there, before human subjective experiences, is already quality in life, something remarkable because it is exceptional. If you like, humans *need* to admire and respect these fish more than they need bluegrass lawns, or an overpopulated Arizona, or a few more beef cattle, or introduced game fish. That is a moral need. Humans need development sensitizing them to values intrinsic in nature more than they need water development; they need a moral development constraining any water development that endangers species.

Authorities are to be commended because, on the Virgin River drainage in Utah in 1980, they abandoned the Warner Valley project lest it jeopardize the woundfin, *Plagopterus argentissimus*, and built the Quail Creek project instead.¹⁷ Humans needed to do that. But the focus of this *need* cannot be simply a matter of human excellences. The alternate dam was not built in order to generate noble human character or to preserve experiences of wonder (although both of these things happened). The alternative was chosen to preserve notable fish and their natural excellences.

It is safe to say that, in the decades ahead, the quality of life in the American West will decline in proportion to the loss of biotic diversity, though it is usually thought that we are sacrificing biotic diversity to improve human life. So there is a sense in which humans will not be losers if we save endangered fish, cactuses, snakes, toads, and butterflies. There is a sense in which those who do the right thing never lose, even when they respect values other than their own. Slave owners do not really lose when they free their slaves because the slave owners become better persons by freeing their slaves, to whom they can thereafter relate person to person. Subsequent human relationships will be richer. After we get the deepest values clear in morality, only the immoral lose—that is Socrates' argument. Similarly, humans who protect endangered fish will, if and when they change their value priorities, be better persons for their admiring respect for other forms of life.

But this should not obscure the fact that humans can and sometimes should be short-term losers. Sometimes we ought to make sacrifices, at least in terms of what we presently value, to preserve species. On such occasions humans might be duty-bound to be losers in the sense that they have sacrificed values and adopted an altered set of values, although they would still be winners for doing the right thing. Ethics is not merely about what humans love, enjoy, and find rewarding or about what they find wonderful, find ennobling, or want as souvenirs. It is sometimes a matter of what humans *ought* to do, like it or not, and these *oughts* may not always rest on the likes of other humans or on what ennoble character.

Sometimes we ought to consider worth beyond that within our selves. It would be better, in addition to our preferences, our self-development, our self-interest, our concern, to be virtuous, to know the full truth of the human obligation—to have the best reasons, as well as the good ones. If one insists on putting it this way—emphasizing a paradox in responsibility—concern for nonhumans can ennoble humans (although this concern short circuits if the concern is explicitly or tacitly just for noble humans). Noblesse oblige. But those who act responsibly with concern for their nobility miss the mark. The real concern is for the other benefited. Genuine concern for nonhumans could humanize our race all the more.

That is what the argument about environmental virtue ethics seems to be trying to say, but if taken as the whole truth, it confuses a desirable result with the primary locus of value. A naturalistic account values species and speciation intrinsically, not as resources or as a means to human virtues. The value at stake precedes, overleaps, and (if we act rightly) succeeds our human presence. I need something bigger on my horizon than my virtues.

Any seeking of excellences, worrying about personal achievements, trying to act nobly, checking my contributions to my community flourishing but double checking

against my own flourishing, finds that the sought-after excellence leaks away because there is a hole in the bucket. If we ever get the slightest suspicion that one is cultivating virtues by using (even reverencing) another, that person's entire moral stance is undermined by the smell of hypocrisy. The positive is inverted to a negative, rather like putting a minus sign before a positive value in an algebraic parenthesis. In the end the quest for human virtues is not just misplaced; it backfires.

Environmental virtue ethics here confronts a version of the ancient paradox of hedonism, that aiming for pleasure is a sure way not to get it. The self curves in on itself and becomes ingrown. The logic moves too close to the classic self-defeating character of self-interest, including my enlightened self-interest. There is a parallel paradox classically found by the theologians: one must lose one's life to find it. One cannot care for others in order to gain reward, looking for stars in one's crown, but neither can one care for others selflessly without being rewarded. The virtuous have to crack a paradox. C. S. Lewis warns: "You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first."¹⁸

You cannot become virtuous by putting this human concern first; you get such virtue only by putting first a respect for life's intrinsic value, which preceded, envelops, and surrounds us and of which we are a subsequent and marvelously endowed participant. "Reverence for life," Jason Kawall tell us, is in humans "an environmental virtue."¹⁹ But put first things first: life in nonhuman (and human) others, and second things second, one's virtues. Life will be inadequately revered if I respect the lives of others with the increase of my virtue in mind. The foundation here is a life ethics, not a virtue ethics.

"Genuine virtue" promotes "ecosystem sustainability," claims Louke van Wensveen. There is a feedback loop: "Ecosystem sustainability is a necessary condition for the cultivation of a virtue"; "a genuine virtue includes the goal of ensuring necessary conditions for its cultivation." But what are we really sustaining here: human virtue and its underlying ecosystemic grounds or ecosystems with values more comprehensive than human virtues? Lest "ecosystem sustainability is only brought in as a means for human moral agency," Wensveen has to caution, "to say that ecosystem sustainability is a necessary condition for the cultivation of a virtue is not to say that it is *only* that. . . . We know that ecosystem sustainability is *also* a necessary condition for the existence and functioning of many nonhuman beings, including nonhuman animal and plant species and individual organisms within ecosystems."²⁰ But then, as I am arguing, a virtue ethics is only halfway there without this additional component. If so, this sustainable-virtue-entwined-with-sustainable-ecosystems loop is not the final concern of the ethic at all. This is really an ethic about a sustainable biosphere. Again, first things first.

"Virtue ethics is more concerned with cultivating an excellent, praiseworthy character," concludes Bill Shaw. And he continues: "Beyond that, there is nothing in virtue ethics that precludes the position that the 'good' consists in part of something like 'integrity, stability, and beauty' of the natural world 'for its own sake.'"²¹ Virtue ethicists, it seems, are continually having to notice this "beyond" that their ethic is tending not to address. My argument here is that going "beyond" is no permitted option but, rather, is essential to any authentic environmental ethic. Those who remain more concerned with cultivating their character miss the point of the ethic.

Henry David Thoreau is often taken as a role model environmentalist. But Thoreau, retreated to Walden, out by himself and cultivating his experiences, seems rather too concerned with what he can get out of life: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."²² A straightforward paraphrase is: "I went to the woods to find myself, to get the most out of life." Each person ought indeed to "find himself" (Socrates' "examined life"); but what one finds in the woods is others' "not self" (as one ought to also find in town). This leaves us wondering, Where is the concern for others, people or plants, except as they serve his autobiographical and educational interests?

Thoreau writes: "In Wildness is the preservation of the World. . . . From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind"; "our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness."²³ Amen; human life is incomplete without encounter with wildness. But looked at again, there is a worry: Is wildness to be conserved *only* as a bracing tonic, as medication to insure our health? Only as for the marrow we can suck and sweeten our lives? Is not wildness here being preserved not so much for itself as in order that *our* human world be preserved? What Thoreau gets out of it keeps returning as the bottom line.

Daniel Botkin reports: "Thoreau's rationales were human oriented. I found little if any discussion in his writings of an intrinsic value of nature independent of the ability of human beings to benefit from it. Thus, of the [several] reasons to conserve nature, Thoreau would seem to have supported all but what is today called the moral."²⁴ John Broderick agrees: "To Thoreau the final importance of nature is in its effect on man."²⁵ Maybe Thoreau, overly concerned about his self-development, did not learn what those woods really had to teach: respect for the integrity of wild lives.

Philip Cafaro concludes: "Thoreau was a leading exponent of 'virtue ethics': that half of ethics which talks less about our duties and responsibilities to others, and more about our opportunities for personal development and flourishing. . . . These arguments need to be made along with intrinsic value arguments if we are to convince people to take the steps necessary to protect the natural world." He notes: "Thoreau is a virtue ethicist: particularly in *Walden* he focuses less on our duties toward others and more on questions of [personal] excellence and flourishing."²⁶ But Cafaro insists that Thoreau knew as well the other half of ethics, concern for intrinsic value in nature. For example, Thoreau admires the fish, such as shad, imperiled by dams in the eastern rivers: "Away with the superficial and selfish phil-*anthropy* of men,—who knows what admirable virtue of fishes may be below low-water mark."²⁷ Thoreau is using the word *virtue* in the archaic sense of an "excellence," survival skills in the migratory fish (with no reference to praiseworthy character achievement, thus analogous to perfect pitch in humans). Thoreau's concern for fish here is a predecessor to the contemporary concerns for endangered fish that we were considering earlier. Such achievements in the fish are, as Cafaro notices, now better termed "intrinsic values." If so, then the other half of Thoreau's ethic is better termed a value-based ethic and not a virtue-based ethic.

Meanwhile, we still worry that this more ultimate half of the ethics lies more often in the background than the foreground. True, Thoreau is in the woods rejoicing in these animals and plants he encounters; but his more evident concern is for bracing tonics and sucking the marrow out of life. Examining “Thoreau’s project of self-fashioning,” Jane Bennett finds that even his cultivation of his naturalist skills were “techniques of the self.”²⁸ For Thoreau, “in the end those who seek to protect wild nature do so as much for their own sakes as for Nature’s.”²⁹

If we compare Thoreau with other icons of environmentalism, we can see that this search for self-fulfillment does not dominate the concerns of Aldo Leopold, or Rachel Carson, or Jane Goodall, or E. O. Wilson, because all these persons are overwhelmed by self-transcending commitments that are orders of magnitude greater than themselves. Leopold seeks a land ethic, the integrity of the biotic community; Carson laments the vanished warblers, the silent spring, the vanished fish in the dying ocean; Goodall respects the chimpanzees; Wilson (*pace* his “selfish genes”) cares deeply for the ants. No doubt each could say that we care for the other lest we lose something of our character. Wilson can appeal to our human “biophilia,” “the human bond with other species,” genetically based and cultivated for our flourishing.³⁰ But what each most fears is the loss of these wild others, for their own sakes, not some loss of our experiences that we would have been the better for. Of course, each will say, “I win when they win.” Second things follow first things. But none will say: “I save them as bracing tonic; with them I suck the most marrow from life.” That puts second things first, and would-be winners become losers.

We can worry about such displacement in Robert L. Chapman’s account of environmental virtue ethics:

Virtue ethics is more interested in character development, and while we can attribute intrinsic value to the “integrity, stability and beauty” (harmony) of the biotic community, it remains a human activity that will be evaluated from a human-in-nature perspective. . . . We are not only valuing human excellence but also the *place* from which it arises. It is not as if we locate intrinsic value in the world of nature and human value is an adjunct to it. . . . Human value is recorded within the incunabula [cradle] of nature; you cannot properly value one without the other. Living well and the activities that promote the good life result from environmental sensitivity (a complex concatenation of values). . . . Cooperation exemplified by virtuous actions preserves a place for human participation and ultimately a place-based identity befitting human development.³¹

A charitable bending of this passage might find an ethic with two foci: human virtues and natural values. But the more straightforward account is that human value here is not an adjunct; it is, rather, the *sine qua non*. Humans must win often enough to have their vital needs met, but they can and ought to behave with caring concern for fauna and flora because the result of this is that they become quite excellent humans. Human virtue is not the only good in the world, but still it comes across as the ultimate good, for that is the way this “virtue ethics” is titled and identified. If you want to promote your physical and psychological health, then you ought to encounter nature. If we

want a healthy society, then we need to preserve nature so that we still have something natural with which to have such encounters.

That, happily, solves the is/ought problem, for it is rather easy to move from what is healthy to what one ought to do. That, however, also brings this worry: We seem to make love of nature tributary to self-love. But when we frame nature up in terms of what it can contribute to our virtue, this puts nature in the wrong reference frame.

Ethics is about optimizing and conserving moral and other values. This is a more comprehensive question than whether the self has optimized its own excellences. The focus on human virtue leads us to make the fallacy of misplaced location. Some critics complain that to locate value in nature commits the naturalistic fallacy. Perhaps, but for those who take seriously the richness of biodiversity on Earth, to locate value in humans commits the humanistic fallacy. Virtue ethics, if this half-truth is mistaken for the whole, becomes a light-in-the-refrigerator theory of value. Perhaps value is there in the dark but is unseen until humans open the door; the light comes on, and what was once in the dark lights up human virtues. The fallacy is that such humans are really “in the dark” about the depth of values in nature beyond their own lighting up.

The virtuous naturalist, if we must say it, is ennobled, but the person is not ennobled alone and isolated but, rather, only as reconnected into a larger value web. The self knows its ecology. It is not that what we choose is satisfying and that brings our good. Rather, what is satisfying is our good; and the environmental component is that we find the ecology we inhabit satisfying. This ecology can be satisfying to us if and only if it is both resource and residence, only if we use it but also live in meaningful community. We are not choosing it for our virtue, but our virtue is bound up with it.

Would we choose conservation without our resulting virtue? That is a difficult question, not because we think we ought to answer yes or are reluctant to say no. Rather, we do not know how to answer either yes or no. We are constituted in these relationships with these natural others, and we find such a constitution to be enriching; and we also find these natural things, the fauna and flora, adapted fits in their places, a wealth of biodiversity, whether or not we are there to become virtuous by our experiences of encounter. We do want to say: Yes, we want the animals and plants to flourish whether or not we are around to be virtuous.

If we answer, No, we would not choose these things without our accompanying virtues, then just that choice—not choosing them—makes us less virtuous, as well as dissatisfied. Constituted by our ecological communities (as also by our cultural communities), there is no other happiness to be chosen elsewhere. There are other ingredients to becoming virtuous, but they now are conjoined with this ecological one. Repudiating the natural world in which we reside, repudiating our ecology, is itself unsatisfying. Not choosing these ecological goods in order to gain virtues elsewhere is a logical and empirical impossibility. All the other, nonnatural goods, whatever they are and whatever their importance, are undermined with the loss of these natural values.

These fauna and flora have a good of their own, they are located in a good place, they are desired for their own sake: and appreciating them is my flourishing; that is a win-win situation. Oppositely, losing them is losing the quality of life that comes based on them, as well as them being lost in their own right; that is a lose-lose situation. One thing we want to do, in addition to promoting our personal self-interests, is to be re-

sponsible members of a community with integrity. That sense of belonging to a healthy society—and, in environmental ethics, of belonging to a healthy ecosystem—that too is part of our self-interest, but now the self is entwined with the community destinies. We win when we assume responsibility for heritages that are greater than we are. Some things have to be won together. Our sense of what our interest is includes the welfare of the community we inhabit. The human excellence view, if the half-truth is taken for the whole, falls into concern with what a virtue-enhancing view of self is. But we fully flourish not with the excellence of an “own self” but in celebrating the display of excellences in the surrounding world, both there with us and there without us. Humans are the only species capable of enjoying the promise of culture; humans are also the only species capable of enjoying the splendid panorama of life that vitalizes this planet. Humans can and ought to inherit the Earth; we become rich with this inheritance, as and only if we oversee a richness of planetary biodiversity that embraces and transcends us.

Notes

1. Socrates, *Apology*, trans. H. N. Fowler, in *Plato I*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, [1914] 1977), 38. “Know thyself” was inscribed upon the Delphic oracle.
2. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2, 1253a.
3. Lucius Garvin, *A Modern Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), 378.
4. Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
5. Wallace Stegner, “The Wilderness Idea,” in *Wilderness: America’s Living Heritage*, ed. David Brower (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1961), 97–102.
6. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. H. N. Fowler, in *Plato I*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, [1914] 1977), 230d.
7. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1860] 1961), 319.
8. “The Certainties,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1948: 8b.
- 9 This is in the words of Psalm 23.
10. Edith Cobb, “The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood,” *Daedalus* 88 (1959): 538–39. See also Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
11. Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 225–26, 358–59.
12. Dana R. Ono, James D. Williams, and Anne Wagner, *Vanishing Fishes of North America* (Washington, DC: Stone Wall Press, 1983); W. L. Minckley and James E. Deacon, *Battle against Extinction: Native Fish Management in the American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991).
13. Jack E. Williams et al., “Endangered Aquatic Ecosystems in North American Deserts with a List of Vanishing Fishes of the Region,” *Journal of the Arizona–Nevada Academy of Science* 20 (1985): 1–62.
14. There is a now-archaic sense of *virtue* that refers to any efficacy or power. In this sense even inanimate things, such as minerals, have virtues. The etymological root is the Latin *vir*, “man,” hence *virile*, “having manly strength.”

15. Philip Cafaro, "Thoreau's Environmental Ethics in *Walden*," *The Concord Saunterer* (N.S.) 10 (2002): 43; Philip Cafaro, "Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 22 (2001): 14.

16. Socrates, *Apology*, 41d. Psychologists interested in altruistic motivation have often claimed that persons, aroused by the plight of others, may act to aid them but that the real goal is to reduce unpleasant arousal, not directly to help others. One acts so as to incur the least costs and most benefits in terms of feeling good about oneself and having others think well of oneself. Because helping others is obviously often accompanied by feeling good about one's success in so doing, it is difficult to isolate selfish and unselfish motives.

In the years between 1962 and 1982, there were over 1,000 empirical studies of altruism, and a review of them leaves the matter unsettled (John F. Dovidio, "Helping Behavior and Altruism: An Empirical and Conceptual Overview," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. L. Berkowitz [New York: Academic Press, 1984]) but does not eliminate the possibility that on occasion moral altruism is the primary determinant. One hardly wants or expects to find many occasions on which the altruist feels bad about his or her altruism, or feels indifferent, or is censured by others, and the debate almost becomes moot.

However, in studies over the last decade designed to isolate these motives, the egoistic hypothesis that seeming altruism is in fact done to reduce negative arousal has met serious empirical challenge. There is "impressive support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis," which specifies "that empathic emotion evokes truly altruistic motivation, motivation with an ultimate goal of benefiting not the self but the person for whom empathy is felt," and this is important "for our understanding of human nature" (C. Daniel Batson and Laura L. Shaw, "Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives," *Psychological Inquiry* 2 [1991]: 107–22; and Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996]).

17. James E. Deacon, "The Endangered Woundfin and Water Management in the Virgin River, Utah, Arizona, Nevada," *Fisheries* 13, no. 1 (1988): 18–24.

18. C. S. Lewis, *First and Second Things*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 1985), 22.

19. Jason Kawall, "Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue," *Environmental Ethics* 25 (2003): 339–58.

20. Louke van Wensveen, "Ecosystem Sustainability as a Criterion for Genuine Virtue," *Environmental Ethics* 23 (2001): 232–34.

21. Bill Shaw, "A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 19 (1997): 64.

22. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 81–82.

23. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *The Natural History Essays*, Henry David Thoreau (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980), 613; Thoreau, *Walden*, 283.

24. Daniel Botkin, *No Man's Garden: Thoreau and a New Vision for Civilization and Nature* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000), 54.

25. John Broderick, "Thoreau's Proposals for Legislation," *American Quarterly* 7 (1955): 288–89.

26. Cafaro, "Thoreau's Environmental Ethics in *Walden*," 18, 35, cf. 24.

27. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 37; Cafaro, "Thoreau's Environmental Ethics in *Walden*," 20.

28. Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 16, 25–29.

29. Cafaro, "Thoreau's Environmental Ethics in *Walden*," 47.

30. Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

31. Robert L. Chapman, "The Goat-Stag and the Sphinx: The Place of the Virtues in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Values* 11 (2002): 136.