

ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE EDUCATION:  
ANCIENT WISDOM APPLIED

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The focus of environmental philosophy has thus far heavily depended on the extension of rights to nonhuman nature. Due to inherent difficulties with this approach to environmental problems, I propose a shift from the contemporary language of rights and duties to the concept of character development. I claim that a theory of environmental virtue ethics can circumvent many of the difficulties arising from the language of rights, duties, and moral claims by emphasizing the cultivation of certain dispositions in the individual moral agent.

In this thesis, I examine the advantages of virtue ethics over deontological and utilitarian theories to show the potential of developing an ecological virtue ethic. I provide a preliminary list of ecological virtues by drawing on Aristotle's account of traditional virtues as well as on contemporary formulations of environmental virtues. Then, I propose that certain types of rules (rules of thumb) are valuable for the cultivation of environmental virtues, since they affect the way the moral agent perceives a particular situation. Lastly, I offer preliminary formulations of these rules of thumb.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ETHICS.....	5
An Overview .....	5
Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics .....	7
Deontological Systems of Ethics: Immanuel Kant .....	10
Utilitarianism .....	15
Current Trends in Environmental Philosophy .....	20
2. THE POTENTIAL OF VIRTUE ETHICS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY.....	32
Virtue Ethics Revisited .....	32
Virtues and Their Impact on Moral Perception .....	43
Moral Perception and the Emotions .....	46
The Role of Rules in Virtue Ethics .....	56
Can Virtues Be Taught? The Necessity of Character Education.....	64
3. ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUES APPLIED .....	70
The Potential of Environmental Virtue Ethics.....	70
Essential Environmental Virtues .....	81
Non-Constitutive Rules for Ecological Virtue Ethics .....	100
CONCLUSION .....	110

## INTRODUCTION

Arguably, environmental philosophy is a relatively young discipline. Nevertheless, it has already faced great difficulties in defining the moral status of the natural environment. These difficulties come as no surprise, seeing that customarily the ethical systems that have dominated the Western world tend to utterly ignore the non-human components of the world. Due to ubiquitous dualisms prevalent in many aspects of Western thought, the natural environment has traditionally been regarded as alien and inferior to the superior realm of humanity. In many cases, as a result, the natural environment has not been integrated into traditional systems of ethics, due to its presumed inability to merit any moral consideration. Apparently, this failure to include nature in ethical theory has been a major contributor to the deplorable treatment of the natural environment both in past and present times. Consequently, it is highly probable that the insufficient ethical and moral consideration of nature constitutes one of the causes for the environmental crisis the world is facing. In recent years, it has become clear that a change in the conventional attitude is necessary, a change which incorporates the development of a more inclusive system of ethics.

Proponents of the current theories of environmental ethics have eagerly attempted to include the natural environment in their moral considerations. However, doing so still remains a challenge, as frequently the prerequisite for moral considerability is argued in terms of an entity's rationality. In recent years, the environmental movement has brought forth many different interest groups,

which diverge in terms of their boundary conditions for moral considerations. Different factions of environmentalists expand moral consideration to include sentient beings (as is the case in the animal rights/ liberation movement), plants, inanimate objects, and even entire ecosystems (environmental ethics). While these efforts are commendable, they have led to an internal split in the environmental movement, since their ethical concerns do not necessarily coincide.<sup>1</sup> Despite their internal differences, these ethical systems share certain features that may contribute to the magnitude of the divide. Since they consist of rule-based forms of ethics and are frequently formulated in terms of moral rights and duties, the theories have to determine which entities merit moral consideration. Arguably, this determination is the main point of disagreement between the competing theories, as well as the most difficult component for the grounding of environmental philosophy in general. Since previously only human beings qualified as moral agents due to their inherent rationality, every attempt to extend moral considerability to include non-rational beings is bound to be contentious. Potentially, another system of ethics, namely virtue ethics, could provide an alternative approach for environmental philosophy, as it does not explicitly have to distinguish between creatures meriting moral considerability and those that do not. Furthermore, theories of virtue ethics focus on the development of moral character instead of merely judging individual actions of a moral agent. This pronounced emphasis on character development carries with it an educational component instead of providing clear-cut rules for moral behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *The Animal Rights/Environmental Ethics Debate*, ed. Eugene Hargrove (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1992).

Although it has been contended that virtue ethics are therefore difficult, if not impossible, to apply to real-life situations, I show that these complexities are inherent in all systems of ethics.

The first chapter of this essay focuses on presenting the traditional ethical systems prevalent in the Western world, which have thoroughly permeated the realm of environmental ethics and determined its overall quality. I show the potential drawbacks of deontological and consequentialist theories of environmental ethics that are dependent on establishing the moral status of non-human entities. As previously mentioned, the main disagreement between the different movements seems to be in their respective assessments as to who or what merits moral considerability. Without taking sides on the issue, I demonstrate the general undesirability of having to ascertain the moral status of natural entities for their ethical treatment.

In the second chapter, I describe and explain the basic concepts of virtue ethics. In doing so, I focus on the virtue theory of Aristotle, because it is considered one of the finest examples of virtue ethics in the history of philosophy. I examine the differences between rule-based (i.e., deontological and consequentialist theories) and virtue ethics in an attempt to illustrate the prospective benefits of an education focused on character development as a foundation for an environmental ethic. Specifically, the concept of moral perception plays a prominent role in this discussion, since I argue that the acquisition of virtue is intimately associated with the shaping and refinement of moral perception. In this context, the question of the role of rules in virtue ethics

comes into play, as I try to demonstrate that moral perception is subconsciously changed by studying rules. Ultimately, I argue that certain types of rules (“rules of thumb”) are not only appropriate for a system of ecological virtue ethics, but in fact assist in the development of environmental virtues in inexperienced moral agents.

The third chapter focuses on the potential application of environmental virtue ethics. First off, I determine the virtues essential to any theory of ecological virtue ethics by discussing the works of several authors concerned with the development of a theory of environmental virtue ethics. In addition, I formulate non-constitutive rules of thumb that would reinforce the cultivation of genuine ecological virtue.

# CHAPTER 1

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ETHICS

### An Overview

Generally speaking, three fundamental approaches to ethics that have dominated ethical theory in the Western world are virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialist ethics, respectively. Countless other ethical systems have been developed, but these three ethical positions are the most ubiquitous and distinguished. Furthermore, for the purposes of this specific essay, a discussion of these ethical positions is more than sufficient, especially since environmental ethics has arguably been dominated by deontological and consequentialist accounts.

Historically, the tradition of virtue ethics is much older than both the deontological and the consequentialist theories of morality, for virtue ethics constitute the ethical foundations of ancient Greek philosophy and are first discussed at length in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The question arises as to why the ancient concept of ethics has been replaced with rule-based ethical systems. Since this essay is intended to show the potential relevance of virtue theory to contemporary problems, the validity and applicability of virtue ethics needs to be examined closely. It is thus important to show that the virtue theory of ethics has not been replaced due to a practical failure in its application; rather, the substitution has transpired because of basic cultural and religious changes in society.



According to Richard Taylor, the fundamental differences between virtue ethics and ethical theories of duty are rooted in their very origin. He states:

The Greeks derived their ethical ideals, and with them their philosophical approaches to ethics, from human nature, from a consideration of human needs and aspirations, and from their reflections on political life. We, on the other hand, *have derived ours from religion*. And even though many persons, and certainly most philosophers, are no longer dominated by religious conviction in their thinking, our whole culture still views questions of ethics within the framework established by religion. We still assume that the basic ethical questions have to do with actions or policies, and that those questions reduce ethics to moral rightness or permissibility.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, distinct religious and cultural traditions can be identified as being at the root of the fundamental difference between the ancient form of ethics and the deontological approach.

In order to understand this claim, a closer look at ancient Greek culture is helpful. Even though the Greeks held certain beliefs about the gods, their concept of religion was distinctly different from the Judeo-Christian model. The Greek gods were generally not regarded as omnipotent, supernatural, and perfect beings; on the contrary, they were subject to passions and desires and thus acquired a very “human” character. Even though sacrifices and rituals were performed in honor of the gods, an individual’s foremost duty was not directed toward the gods, but instead towards the political and social community. Thus, in the Greek understanding, moral actions consisted of the adherence to the customs and laws of the society, since political and social obligations took precedence over all other duties. With the rise of Christianity, the polytheistic and strongly humanistic culture of the ancient Greeks was replaced by a monotheistic

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Taylor, *Virtue Ethics: An Introduction* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 5.

system that believed in an omnipotent God, to whom all obligations were ultimately owed. As can already be seen in the Ten Commandments, the ancient virtue language had been equally substituted for the language of duties and responsibilities (“Thou *shalt* not kill”). Likewise, the focus of ethical theory shifted away from the achievement of personal human excellence through the acquisition of virtues; instead, moral law became the main concern of ethics. As Taylor points out, “morality now went beyond obedience to merely human laws, customs, and traditions, and came to be thought of instead as obedience to divine law.”<sup>3</sup> The shift in focus of ethical theory from this point onwards reveals the deep association of Western culture with rule-based theories of ethics.

### Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics

Briefly summarized, the major distinguishing feature of virtue ethics is its emphasis on the cultivation of virtues. In other words, these ethical theories focus on the character traits of the moral agent, since any moral act is understood as an expression of the moral agent’s character. Virtue ethics generally concerns itself with the question of what the good life is and how it is attained. In this way, virtue theory attempts to determine how a virtuous person would act in specific situations in accordance to his or her character, rather than merely provide a set of rules to adhere to. Naturally, the question of why a person should engage in virtuous rather than vicious actions demands to be answered in order to comprehend the ultimate aim of the ethical life. Since it frequently seems that

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.7.

human beings are self-centered creatures, who would not simply become virtuous for the sake of the virtues themselves, a moral incentive for the cultivation of virtue is necessary. In other words, it would be difficult to maintain that people should become virtuous simply because virtues have inherent value and should therefore be pursued. Thankfully, many virtue theories strongly assert that there is more at stake for each individual.

Celebrated as one of the greatest minds in the history of Western thought, Aristotle has developed an extensive account of virtue ethics. In his discussion of virtues and the good life, Aristotle examines the behavior and motives of people trying to determine why they act in the way they do. He concludes that ultimately people are concerned with being happy and fulfilled in their lives, with living a “good” life. Without any doubt, Aristotle does value the virtues in and of themselves, thus regarding them as ends-in-themselves. Nevertheless, in Aristotle’s ethical theory, the virtues are also regarded as means to a further, definitive end. The ultimate objective of human existence, argues Aristotle, is consists of *eudaimonia*, or happiness, which can only be achieved by leading an active, complete and virtuous life. Therefore, the development of virtues is closely associated with the enlightened self-interest of moral agents, which is a common point of criticism aimed at systems of virtue ethics. Another perceived drawback of virtue ethics is seen in the lack of guidance it is able to provide in regards to specific situations. In other words, theories of virtue ethics do not spell out rules and principles that ought to be followed; on the contrary, by solely focusing on the habituation of certain character traits, virtue theories attempt to

ground the capability of making good ethical decisions in firm qualities of character. While it appears much easier to follow simple and straightforward principles than becoming a virtuous person, there are certain benefits associated with the cultivation of virtues. I provide a significantly more detailed discussion of virtue ethics in chapter two, since this section is only intended to compare the ancient system of virtue ethics with deontological and consequentialist ethics.

During the Middle Ages, the traditional systems of ethics were largely maintained, but due to the stronghold of the church at that time, the systems underwent changes in substance. As already mentioned, the language of virtue ethics was quickly replaced by the concept of duty. As W.T. Jones explains the shift occurring in the Middle Ages:

Greek ethics had a means-end form, a form that very deeply marked the thought of many Christian philosophers—for instance, St. Thomas. There can be no doubt, however, that Christianity, with its concept of an omnipotent Father, who ought to be obeyed in all things, introduced a new emphasis into moral philosophy. Since, in the Christian view, God's commands are rules, the notion of right, or conformity to rule, became important. At the same time, Christian thinkers took up the Stoic notion on motivation. These two concepts came together in the notion not merely of punctilious conformity to rule but of conformity because the rule issues from the source it issues from. To conform to the rule because we fear punishment is of no account. And to do so because we hope to be rewarded for obedience, or because conformity is a means to happiness, is to "reduce" morality to the Greek type, though of course with a very different set of prescriptions about how to be happy. From the Christian point of view, then, the morally good motive is a very special—one might almost say a very peculiar—one. To act morally, a man must see that the act is right (that is, commanded) and must do it because he sees that it is right. Thus, a Christian ethics is likely to focus on the concept of duty as the exclusive moral motive. A Christian ethics is also likely to emphasize sin, rather than ignorance, as the cause of wrongdoing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W.T. Jones, *Kant and the Nineteenth Century: A History of Western Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 69-70.

As Jones points out, the ancient understanding of vice being caused by an individual's ignorance (Socrates' notion that "no one would willingly do evil") has thus been transformed into the notion of vice as a moral sin. The concept of vice has thereby acquired a different moral connotation, as it is possible to "willingly" perform "evil" actions. Furthermore, the concept of moral motivation has been shifted from the ancient emphasis on character development for the ultimate realization of *eudaimonia*, to the concept of duty, which constitutes the very foundation of deontological theories of ethics. In other words, only actions that are carried out on the basis of duty are considered moral. All other motivations for action are considered morally deficient, including any kind of enlightened self-interest as proposed by virtue ethics.

During the times of the Renaissance and particularly the modern period, systems of virtue ethics virtually disappeared in favor of two other systems of ethical thought, namely deontological and consequentialist theories, respectively. Due to the fact that environmental ethics is a fairly young discipline, having developed within the past three decades or so, it is not surprising to notice its reliance on those two more "modern" forms of ethical theory. In order to gain a better understanding of the current status of environmental ethics, a closer look at both deontological and consequentialist ethical theories is helpful. I examine both traditions in turn and then try to establish their impact on the discipline of environmental ethics.

## Deontological Systems of Ethics: Immanuel Kant

Deontological theories are based on the concept of duty (*deion*), and their structure and scope are strongly represented in the contemporary understanding of ethics. Generally, in contemporary Western culture, ethics is often accredited with providing a distinction between morally “right” and “wrong” behaviors and decisions. In other words, a form of dualism is introduced, which classifies all actions or their underlying maxims into either being morally obligatory or forbidden. If an action falls into neither of these two categories, it is classified as being morally acceptable, which signifies that the action is essentially morally neutral. According to Nicholas Dent, “the core deontic notions by which we formulate and express moral norms are the notions of the morally obligatory, the morally prohibited (forbidden) and the morally permissible.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the modern concept of ethics represents a methodology of classifying actions into the categories of rights, duties, and the morally permissible. The notions of virtue, vice, and the good life have virtually disappeared from the ethical discourse. At the same time, the attention has shifted from a focus on the development and evaluation of the moral character of a person to the assessment of more or less disconnected activities.

The entire system of deontological theory is built on the belief in reciprocal relations of rights and duties between individuals. Duties can be seen as the moral obligations one individual owes to another. In etymological terms, the word

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<sup>5</sup> From Nicholas Dent, “Virtue, *Eudaimonia* and Teleological Ethics,” in David Carr and Jan Steutel, eds., *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 23.

*duty* implies that something is *due* to someone, that something is owed. In the context of ethics, however, duties are regarded as certain principles that are morally binding. As Dent states: “Moral norms so conceptualized are conceived as a *kind of law*, indeed the notion of ‘moral law’ is a very familiar one.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, deontological ethical systems offer guidelines and rules for the morally proper conduct of people. As already mentioned, the principles those systems promote rely heavily on the concept of rights and duties. In this view, all entities worthy of moral consideration possess certain natural rights. However, it is vital to bear in mind that each right an individual holds automatically imposes duties and obligations on the rest of the moral community, as the right of the individual has to be respected and upheld by all other individuals. Through this relationship of rights and duties, the concept of reciprocity is introduced. The majority of ethical systems maintains and supports this principle, since the reciprocity of rights and duties constitutes the very foundation of Western ethical theory. As Watson puts it, “the reciprocity of rights and duties is suggested both by the Golden Rule and by Kant’s Categorical Imperative.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, within the framework of these ethical systems, the distinction between morally right and wrong actions is based on the individual’s success or failure of respecting the rights of other individuals in the moral arena. At the same time, reciprocity is implicitly assumed, since all moral agents ideally respect each others’ rights by abiding by their duties. In order to provide a more detailed explication of deontological ethics, I next introduce Immanuel Kant’s ethical theory.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.23.

One of the most prominent figures in the development of the deontological theory of ethics, Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher who attempted to bridge the gap between the two divergent philosophical systems of continental rationalism and British empiricism. Regarding his ethical views, Kant grounds the basis for all morality in human reason and believes that human beings are born with the ability to rationally determine the moral quality of their actions. He explicitly writes that “pure reason is practical of itself alone, and *it gives (to man) a universal law, which we call the moral law.*”<sup>8</sup> In other words, Kant regards the concept of the moral consciousness, oftentimes referred to as conscience, to be a natural component of human reason, since reason enables human beings to rationally determine the moral value of their behavior. Therefore, he developed his famous formulation of the categorical imperative, which quickly became the exemplification of deontological ethical theory. The primary formulation of the categorical imperative states: “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing *universal law.*”<sup>9</sup> As can easily be seen, the categorical imperative represents a way to formulate a moral code of conduct; it is thus intended to present the unifying rule for making moral decisions in any given situation.

Without elaborating on specific points of criticism regarding Kant’s categorical imperative, I nevertheless want to point out certain weaknesses of

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Watson, “Self-consciousness and the Rights of Nonhuman Animals and Nature,” in Hargrove, *The Animal Rights/ Environmental Ethics Debate*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Pure Reason,” trans. Lewis White Beck, in Jones, *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.



Kant's ethical system that might complicate its application to environmental issues. First of all, locating the basis of morality in human reason restricts the scope of Kant's ethics severely. Since his ethical system integrates the notion of reciprocity, and since this concept can only be comprehended and thus realized by rational beings, the (supposedly non-rational) natural world is automatically excluded from moral consideration. Even though Kant exclaims that "[w]e thus postulate a being—*not only man, but any rational being*—which has freedom of will, and we are concerned here with the principles or rules for the use of that freedom"<sup>10</sup>, the limitation of moral consideration to rational beings exhibits the constraints of his ethical theory.<sup>11</sup> It is decidedly ratiocentric and anthropocentric, which makes its application to the natural world difficult. The second section of this chapter further illustrates the problems of a deontological approach to environmental philosophy.

Second, the system's strict adherence to a formal rule is inherently problematic. Unquestionably, Kant is attempting to separate ethical decisions from the subjective realm of personal feelings or "inclinations." In support of this assertion, he explicitly states that "A moral law states *categorically what ought to be done*, whether it pleases us or not. It is, therefore, not a case of satisfying an inclination."<sup>12</sup> Despite Kant's potentially laudable intention of detaching the moral sphere from the realm of personal feelings in order to make it more objective and

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1930), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> My use of the concept of "ratiocentrism" is by no means intended to imply that valuing human reason is in and by itself morally problematic. However, choosing rationality as the exclusive criterion for moral considerability may complicate the development of a deontological environmental ethic.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1930), p. 37.

binding, his complete disregard for the context or the consequences of moral decisions remains challenging.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, despite its drawbacks, the categorical imperative effectively illustrates the central characteristic of most deontological theories of ethics, since it provides a methodology for assessing the moral quality of one's actions by suggesting a unified principle of conduct.

## Utilitarianism

In reaction to the deontological theory of ethics, which strongly emphasizes the concept of duty as the principle underlying the moral act itself, an ethical system arose that stressed the importance of the outcome of a moral decision. Appropriately known as utilitarianism, this system is a form of consequentialism, and it was first developed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's theory was further refined and promoted by his student John Stuart Mill, who lived between the years 1806 and 1873. In his *Utilitarianism*, Mill formulated the following principle: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."<sup>14</sup> As this principle illustrates, an action is only evaluated in terms of the outcome it produces. If the outcome promotes happiness overall,

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding Kant's disregard for the contexts of moral decisions, some contemporary Kantian scholars argue that a person testing a maxim with the categorical imperative will have to consider all possible outcomes of the moral decision in advance, thus taking consequences and context into consideration after all.

<sup>14</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London, 1863), in Jones, *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 347.

then the action is deemed morally good; if the outcome promotes the opposite of happiness, the moral act is considered bad or evil. Naturally, the question arises as to what is considered happiness and whose happiness is to be promoted. It is significant to note that both Bentham and Mill equate happiness with pleasure and unhappiness with pain or the absence of pleasure; therefore, they both accept the hedonist definitions of pleasure and pain. However, in contrast to Bentham, who develops a hedonic calculus and thus attempts to mathematically determine the happiness an action provides, Mill relies on the estimations of experienced and educated people. In summary, Mill's philosophy prescribes that the basic principle to follow consists of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people; the kind of happiness that ought to be increased is determined by a large group of well-informed, and preferably well-educated, people, who can presumably distinguish between so-called "lower" and "higher" pleasures. At this point, it is worth mentioning that according to Mill, higher pleasures are those that involve the higher faculties of man, whereas lower pleasures consist of the satisfaction of crude desires that human beings share with other creatures. As this distinction illustrates, John Stuart Mill's ethical position also emphasizes the significance of human reason for the ethical life, even though considerations of pleasure and pain take precedence. Nonetheless, a certain degree of ratiocentrism is present in Mill's ethics. Naturally, this is not to say that a ratiocentric position is in itself problematic, as it is frequently argued that theories of virtue ethics are equally concerned with the authority of human reason.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, seeing that the charge of ratiocentrism has been brought

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<sup>15</sup> See Susanne Foster "Aristotle and the Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 24, no. 4 (2002): 409-428.

up against potential theories of environmental virtue ethics, I want to show that more traditional accounts of deontological and consequentialist ethics are equally ratiocentric.

Undeniably, utilitarianism shares many characteristics with the philosophy of hedonism, since happiness is typically equated with pleasure. The only difference between systems of utilitarianism and hedonism is that hedonism generally promotes happiness/pleasure for an individual, whereas utilitarianism is always concerned with happiness/pleasure for large numbers of people. Overall, then, utilitarianism is concerned with the outcome of an action and does not morally evaluate the motivation underlying the agent's action. This emphasis on the consequences of an action stands in direct contrast to Kant's understanding of the "good will," since he argues:

There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will.... A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, not because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself. When it is considered in itself, then it is to be esteemed very much higher than anything which it might ever bring about merely in order to favor some inclination, or even the sum total of all inclinations.<sup>16</sup>

As this passage shows, Kant is solely concerned with the motive for a moral action, whereas Mill tries to maximize happiness (pleasure) in his philosophy of social hedonism. Due to their diverging emphases, deontological and consequentialist ethical systems have often been regarded as being diametrically opposed to one another: Whereas one theory chooses to appraise

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<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Wellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 7.

the motivation for a moral action, the other system evaluates an action in terms of its outcomes. Unsurprisingly, it is extremely difficult to determine which of these approaches, if any, is morally superior. The approach of evaluating an agent's motivation appears to be impracticable, as the motivation is only clear to the agent himself or herself (if even that). Because the action might or might not accurately reflect the agent's motivation, outside spectators are unable to accurately evaluate another person's motivation. At the same time, the approach of choosing actions in terms of their outcome can be equally daunting. After all, the consequences of an action cannot confidently and accurately be predicted prior to acting, which greatly reduces the effectiveness of the principles of utilitarianism. Also, if a person has immoral intentions and accidentally causes the overall increase of happiness, it remains doubtful whether the act should therefore be considered morally good. As these examples show, both ethical theories exhibit definite drawbacks, and the application of their proposed principles is rarely clear-cut and simple.

It is striking that despite their obvious differences, both utilitarianism and Kantian ethics exclusively focus on the actions (either the intentions for or the consequences of action) of a moral agent. Neither of the ethical systems accounts for the character of the moral agent; instead, they both provide neat and tidy formulations of principles to be followed. It is hardly surprising that these clear and succinct ethical systems have a broad appeal as they are easy to understand and straightforward to pursue. Furthermore, both afford the appearance of objectivity in ethical matters, which on the surface seems more

trustworthy and creditable than the dependence on emotion and subjectivity. However, the truth of the matter is that in ethical decision making the situation is rarely ever so clear-cut and straightforward as to make a categorical application of principles possible or even desirable. Moreover, the matter of objectivity in ethical decision making remains disputed to say the least. As I demonstrate below, what these theories gain due to their simplicity, they easily lose due to their general inflexibility. The appeal to categorical principles only provides the illusion of simplicity, since most moral agents are confronted with complex and intricate moral contexts that do not allow for oversimplification. Furthermore, the strict implementation of principles frequently results in conflicting claims, since separate rules can lead to contradictions or inconsistencies. Therefore, it is plain to see that theories of virtue ethics are not the only ones faced with the complexity of practical application; the tension between theoretical systems and their practical application is present in all ethical systems..

Additionally, the language employed by rights-based and rule-based systems of ethics is frequently tiresome and ineffective, since moral agents are asked to evaluate conflicting claims by looking at the duties that are owed by one creature to another, and so on. In other words, the entire realm of ethical theory is reduced to the arena of moral dilemmas. It seems that ethics can only take place if there is a problem or predicament that needs to be “resolved.” Given its focus on rights, duties, competing claims, and moral rules, the ethical realm is severely impoverished, as the importance of healthy and productive relationships is thereby minimized. This characterization suggests that definite problems arise

out of the rule-based traditions popular in the Western world. Their application to environmental issues is disputed because certain inherent features are detrimental to the development of an environmental ethic that is based on rights, duties, and universal principles. To begin with, the rules apparently only apply to rational agents, since they are presumably the only ones who are able to understand and apply them. This narrow range of application in turn poses two additional problems. First, how do we ground our obligations or duties to nonhuman entities if reciprocity is not a feasible provision for moral behavior? In other words, why should a human being refrain from killing a lion if the lion wouldn't do the same in return? Second, if rationality is no longer the criterion for moral considerability, which entities deserve moral consideration? Previously, human beings were assumed to have moral status because of their ability to reason. Obviously, a new criterion for moral status is necessary for deontological and consequentialist environmental ethic. Needless to say, numerous criteria of various kinds have already been proposed in answer to these important issues, which has internally divided the environmental movement. In order to illustrate the current dominance of rule-based systems of ethics in environmental philosophy, I illuminate the current trends in environmental philosophy in the subsequent section.

## Current Trends in Environmental Philosophy

Since its conception, the field of environmental philosophy has been notably divided between two main factions. Despite their shared claims to environmental conscientiousness, their approaches to environmental issues are significantly different and they rarely see eye to eye on environmental problems. Nevertheless, I show here that both of these groupings work under the guise of rule-based systems of ethics, as they both promote the recognition of certain duties or obligations owed to the natural environment by human beings. In other words, the environmental movement as a whole has increasingly relied on the concept of rights possessed by nonhuman entities. Naturally, these rights *ought to be* respected by humankind. In order to point out this characteristic prevalent in current environmental trends, I first examine the movements concerned with animal rights and environmental ethics, respectively, by first describing their general outlines and values, and second, by pointing out the deontological characteristics of their particular agendas.

In principle, deontological theories of ethics do not appear suitable for addressing the current environmental crisis. Since these ethics heavily depend on the notions of rights and duties, it becomes essential to establish who or what merits moral consideration. Traditionally, systems of deontological ethics have solely focused on the rights and duties of human beings, since they have conventionally been regarded as the only creatures deserving of moral standing.



The ethical system developed by Kant, for example, seemingly supports this view. In one of his lectures, Kant explicitly writes:

So far as animals are concerned, *we have no direct duties*. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man.... Our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity. Animal nature has analogies to human nature, and by doing our duties to animals in respect of manifestations of human nature, we indirectly do our duty towards humanity.<sup>17</sup>

Kant's view here is profoundly anthropocentric, for all actions and moral decisions are instigated by feelings of moral consideration toward humanity. However, despite his view that animals in themselves do not deserve moral concern, Kant does not condone cruel and unkind acts toward sentient beings. His reason for the condemnation of cruelty against animals, however, is not rooted in the moral significance of the animals themselves; rather, he maintains that cruelty toward animals will lead the perpetrator to act maliciously toward other human beings as well. In one of his lectures on ethics, Kant states that "tender feelings towards dumb animals develop humane feelings towards mankind."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the moral and kind treatment of animals is regarded as an indirect service to humankind, since it refines and supports the moral relationship between human beings. Even though Kant's system of ethics thus ensures the moral treatment of animals, the ethical status of nonhuman beings is not significantly improved, since the form of conduct is not based on the moral standing of animals themselves. Therefore, animals are still simply regarded as

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<sup>17</sup> Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1930), p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

means (instruments) to an end, which is humanity. In terms of environmental ethics, nonhuman nature does not possess any intrinsic value.

However, it is worth pointing out that proponents of Kant's ethical position have argued that his attitude regarding human obligations to nonhuman entities and the natural environment evolves throughout the course of his career. For example, in the second part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, which was published in 1797, Kant argues:

A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to man's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in man which, though not of itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it. With regard to the animate but nonrational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to man's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their pain and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other men. Man is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain) and to put them to work that does not strain them beyond their capacities (such work as man himself must submit to). But agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these, are to be abhorred. Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs indirectly to man's duty with regard to these animals; considered as a direct duty, however, it is always only a duty of man to himself.<sup>19</sup>

Although Kant still denies the existence of direct duties with regard to nonhuman nature, he again acknowledges the indirect duties demanded of rational persons. The major difference between his earlier and his later ethical views can be found in the fact that in the former the indirect duties owed to

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<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 109.

nature are based on a moral agent's indirect duties to other members of the human community, whereas the latter case links the indirect duties owed to nature with direct duties owed to one's own person. Apparently, Kant does acknowledge that a human being owes it to himself or herself to value things beyond their mere instrumental value and utility. In fact, Kant argues that even if they cannot properly be called "moral," the aesthetic sensibilities are an essential part of a human's moral character. In other words, a human ought to value nature and its beauty because he or she owes it to him or herself; by developing aesthetic sensibilities, a human fulfills the duty of improving his or her own character. Kant describes this duty that a human owes to him or herself as follows:

Man has a duty to himself of cultivating (*cultura*) his natural powers (powers of mind, soul, and body), which are the means to all sorts of possible ends. Man owes it to himself (as a rational being) not to leave idle and, as it were, rusting away the natural dispositions and powers that his reason can in any way use.<sup>20</sup>

The *Metaphysics of Morals* were published less than a decade before Kant's death, and thus represent the culmination of his ethical thought. Clearly, Kant realized at a later stage in his life that man is in need of a disposition to love things without reference to their usefulness. Nevertheless, the relationship between human and nonhuman nature remains decidedly anthropocentric in Kant's philosophy, as nature is still seen as a means to the end of man's character development. However, at this point it is essential to point out that I am not trying to promote a biocentric system of environmental ethics; thus, I am not

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

rejecting Kant's system due to its anthropocentric nature alone. In fact, it can be argued that weak anthropocentrism might almost come "natural" to human beings, seeing that among all species a definite preference for their own kind is prevalent.

However, even if anthropocentrism is not reproachable by nature, it has become necessary to focus attention on the human attitude toward nature, since a reevaluation and redefinition of humanity's place in nature can no longer be deferred. This situation raises the question: can a deontological system of ethics, such as Kant's, contribute to the development of environmental ethics, which appropriately reinterprets humanity's situation in the world? Despite the apparent "mismatch" between principle-based ethics and the environmental movement, nearly all formulations of environmental ethical theories have actually relied on traditional deontological or consequentialist systems. The environmental ethicists have long ago acknowledged Aldo Leopold as their spiritual leader. In fact, Leopold's arguably greatest work, *A Sand County Almanac*, is regarded by many as the Bible of the environmental movement. In his "The Land Ethic," Leopold states that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that Leopold neither explicitly states one's duties toward the environment nor provides a set of rules to adhere to, he nevertheless seems to promote the deontological approach to environmental issues. By saying that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community," he implicitly states that it is our duty to preserve these integral

features of our natural environment. Furthermore, he ingeniously provides a set of rules as to how to act toward the environment, always and universally. This environmental universal principle states: “Act always as to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community.” Naturally, there has been much debate as to what constitutes the integrity, stability, and beauty of the natural community, seeing that these terms are vague and leave ample room for interpretation.

Furthermore, the fact that Leopold explicitly mentions the “beauty, stability and integrity” of the biotic community has led some ethicists to regard his land ethic as a system of virtue ethics rather than a rule-based formula. However, it is apparent that in talking about the “beauty, stability, and integrity” of the natural environment, Leopold is not employing those terms in reference to any virtues that are to be cultivated within the character of the moral agent; by using these concepts he merely describes the standards of environmental health that need to serve as parameters to environmentally sound action. Nevertheless, in other sections of the essay, Leopold does allude to certain values and characteristics that are desirable for an ecological human being, since he explicitly states: “It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense.”<sup>22</sup> Leopold thus envisions a relationship between the moral agent and the land that is based on the virtues of respect and love.

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<sup>21</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Consequently, in a very roundabout way, Leopold does characterize certain dispositions that are indispensable to the environmentally conscious person; nevertheless, the most prominent and widely known formulation of the land ethic, as quoted above, exhibits a profoundly rule-based tone.

It comes as no surprise that some environmental philosophers have attempted to derive a system of virtue ethics from the “Land Ethic” by using the above-mentioned formula of “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community” as a criterion for ecological virtue.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, the formula provided by Leopold merely serves as a parameter for the characterization and formulation of authentic environmental virtue; the concepts of “integrity, stability, and beauty” are regarded as the “good” that is to be promoted by the virtuous moral agent. Furthermore, since a healthy and sustainable environment is necessary for the cultivation (the development and maintenance) of virtues, “the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community” are prerequisites and boundary conditions for any environmental virtue ethic. This interpretation of the land ethic and the standard for virtue it proposes closely resembles the “ecological sustainability criterion” described by Louke van Wensveen in her essay “Ecosystem Sustainability as a Criterion for Genuine Virtue.” These two principles are discussed in more detail in the following chapter about environmental virtue theory. For now, it should suffice to

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<sup>23</sup> William Shaw, “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic,” *Environmental Ethics* 19 (1997): 53-69.

say that alternative interpretations of the “Land Ethic” are possible, which render the deontological language of rights and duties in regards to this essay obsolete.

Generally speaking, however, the fundamental belief in the reciprocity of rights and duties between individuals poses a problem for the application of deontological ethics to environmental issues. Since the concept of reciprocity is dependent upon the rational understanding of both parties entering into the social contract, extending rights and duties to nonhuman nature is more than a little problematic.

Despite (or maybe exactly because) of its controversial nature, the concept of “animal rights” has been in the public eye for the last few decades. In very general terms, animal rights activists attempt to extend the concept of rights to include other living beings. This expansion of moral consideration is oftentimes based on the argument of sentience, or in other words, on the ability of creatures to experience pain and suffering. However, the endeavors of the animal rights activists do not only garner criticism from the general public; even numerous fellow environmentalists do not embrace this extremely individualistic approach to environmental ethics.

Baird Callicott’s “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair” provides an insightful look at the differences between the animal liberation movement and the general concerns of environmental ethicists.<sup>24</sup> He argues that the very principle of the animal liberation movement is Benthamic, as it generally regards pain as evil and pleasure as good. Callicott emphasizes that this approach leads to the

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<sup>24</sup> See J. Baird Callicott, “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair,” in J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press), pp. 15-38.

moral obligation to increase the good (pleasure) and minimize pain, which constitutes a traditional consequentialist view. Accordingly, if the basic principle for environmental ethics proponents is summarized in the formulation of the Leopold's "Land Ethic," the fundamental rule for animal rights supporters can be stated as following consequentialist form: "An action is right as long as it increases the overall happiness of all sentient beings; it is wrong if it does the opposite." Therefore, both approaches rely on the formulation of rules to evaluate subsequent actions, whereas they do not take into account the nature or character of the moral agent performing the action.

Furthermore, in the realm of environmental ethics, the view supported by the animal rights faction raises several problems. First of all, as Callicott points out, despite the obvious expansion of ethics to include sentient beings, this criterion for ethical considerability is just as arbitrary as the previous criterion of rationality. It is difficult for the animal rights faction to successfully defend their criterion of sentience for moral considerability, because even though it enlarges the ethical realm to some extent, it still remains very constricted. Arguably, ethical consideration now includes animals, but does not at all account for plants, inanimate objects, or ecological systems. With its focus on the criteria of pleasure and pain, the animal liberation position has become very exclusive indeed. Furthermore, this view only accounts for individual creatures, the significance of which are often weighed equally. In other words, an individual of an endangered species does not necessarily merit additional moral consideration than a member of a relatively common species, which is ecologically problematic. Admittedly,



even though some systems of animal rights ethics try to account for the relative ecological importance of different species (i.e., their place in the food chain, their population numbers, etc.), they nevertheless exclude inanimate entities completely. The very dependence of consequentialist theories on the criterion of sentience cannot account for any entities that cannot experience pleasure or pain; therefore, the animal liberation movement will necessarily be limited in its scope. Furthermore, this atomistic approach of the animal rights theorists does not really account for what is now generally accepted ecological reality: no individual creature lives in isolation of the rest of the natural system. The interconnectedness and interdependence of natural entities has been widely recognized, and necessarily has to be integrated into any feasible theory of environmental ethics. Therefore, consequentialist theories of environmental ethics are inherently problematic, as they appear to advance atomism and individualism.

In contrast to the animal rights theorists, environmentalist ethicists are not particularly interested in the well-being of individual animals; rather, they are concerned with the health of entire ecosystems, the very concept of which generally incorporates the living as well as the non-living natural world. In this respect, the environmental ethics approach appears to adhere more closely to fundamental ecological principles, since it generally takes a more holistic and systemic view of environmental issues. To illustrate the significant difference between the holistic and the atomistic position, consider the following example: in a given natural area, there is a sudden and dramatic increase in the deer

population due to a lack of natural predators and auspicious climate conditions. In such a case, environmental ethics proponents would allow for the culling of a certain number of deer in order to minimize the environmental damage to the ecosystem. However, animal rights advocates would approach the case differently, as they would most likely oppose the killing of individual deer. Instead, they might suggest measures such as the creation of feeding stations in order to minimize the impact of the large population of deer on the surrounding ecosystem. As this example illustrates, despite their shared reliance on rule-based ethical systems, internal disagreements persist between the two perspectives.

In other words, conflicts arise within the field of rule-based systems of environmental ethics. Even though all groups approach environmental issues by trying to establish what “ought” to be done, and by referring to specific principles of conduct, they disagree in other essential details. Ultimately, the rule-based sector of environmentalism is plagued by fundamental disagreements about which entities deserve moral consideration. These disagreements reveal that the inherent problems of both deontological and consequentialist ethical systems are ubiquitous in the discipline of environmental ethics. The traditional reliance on the ethical standard of reciprocity, which can only be realized by rational moral agents, and the subsequent difficulties in extending moral consideration to include the natural environment are the main challenges for the environmental application of principle-based theories of ethics.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE POTENTIAL OF VIRTUE ETHICS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

#### Virtue Ethics Revisited

A fuller discussion of virtue ethics is necessary in light of the criticisms I have brought up against deontological and consequentialist theories of environmental ethics. The question to be answered in this chapter concerns the ability of virtue ethics to circumvent certain problems inherent in deontological and consequentialist theories of environmental ethics. As mentioned, the extension of rights (and consequently duties) to include the natural environment is problematic, since frequently rationality serves as the sole criterion of moral considerability. Thus, I intend to show that an environmental ethic need not take the form of a rule-based theory. In order to make my argument for the development of an environmental virtue ethic, some insights into the ancient theory of virtue are indispensable. First and foremost, a justification and rationale for the cultivation of virtues has to be established.

As mentioned previously, Aristotle developed an extensive account of ethics by articulating the aim of human life as *eudaimonia*, or happiness, which can only be achieved by leading a virtuous life. In that sense, then, the grounding of virtue ethics is admittedly self-centered, because the moral agent is interested in attaining his or her own happiness. Nevertheless, this self-centeredness or self-regard does not in and by itself pose a problem, since self-interest is

common to human beings and could therefore provide a reasonably solid foundation for an ethic. At the same time, the self-regard that virtue ethics proposes is not to be confused with absolutely self-absorbed narcissism or selfishness, since in order for self-regard to become a foundation for an ethic, interest in and attention to others is indispensable.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that the ancient understanding of *eudaimonia* cannot be equated with the contemporary definition of happiness. While in today's world, happiness is closely associated with feelings of pleasure, Aristotle used the term *eudaimonia* to describe a thriving, active life, lived to the fullest of an individual's potential.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, *eudaimonia* is the *telos*, or purpose, of the human life, and therefore ought to be pursued. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains the connection between happiness and virtue as follows:

For this reason also the question is asked, whether happiness is to be acquired by learning or by habituation or some other sort of training, or comes in virtue of some divine providence or again by chance. Now if there is any gift of the gods to men, it is reasonable that happiness should be god-given, and most surely god-given of all human things inasmuch as it is the best.... Happiness seems, however, even if it is not god-sent but comes as *a result of virtue and some process of learning or training*, to be among the most god-like things; for *that which is the prize and the end of virtue seems to be the best thing in the world, and something god-like and blessed.*<sup>26</sup>

According to Aristotle, then, happiness is not ultimately dependent on material possession or external influences; it is the result of consciously living a life of

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<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, Aristotle insists that pleasure cannot be equated with happiness in a moral context, since people frequently take pleasure in morally reprehensible things.

<sup>24</sup> Ross, "Aristotle: *Ethica Nicomachea*," in Jones, *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 60.

virtue. In that sense, persons are largely responsible for their own happiness, and thus have a certain degree of control over their own destiny. It is important to note that Aristotle does acknowledge the necessity of a certain amount of external goods for the attainment of happiness; nevertheless, according to him material possessions is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for happiness. In other words, external possessions alone in no way guarantee subsequent happiness. On the contrary, Aristotle argues, many people neglect the cultivation of virtues if they become overly preoccupied with the accumulation of wealth, which in itself is indicative of a deficient character and so prohibits the realization of *eudaimonia*.

Regarding the intricate connection between the virtues and *eudaimonia*, some scholars have argued that the traditional means-end distinction is imprecise and insufficient in this context, because although the virtues serve as the means to the realization of the end of *eudaimonia*, they nevertheless are valued in and by themselves, and are thus ends-in-themselves. Therefore, it has been suggested that the relationship between the virtues and *eudaimonia* is analogous to the association of parts to the whole. The whole (*eudaimonia*) ultimately represents more than the mere sum of its parts; nevertheless, the components have value in and of themselves, and are thus not purely viewed instrumentally.<sup>27</sup>

Curiously, happiness in the sense of *eudaimonia* is not understood as a character state at any given moment (such as a *feeling* of happiness), because it

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of this position, see Paul Haight, "Ecosystem Integrity and its Value for Environmental Ethics" (M.A. Thesis, University of North Texas, 1996).

has to be evaluated in light of a whole lifetime of a person. In other words, the satisfaction a moral agent feels after having performed a virtuous act is not to be confused with *eudaimonia*. Likewise, performing a single virtuous act does not result in *eudaimonia* for the moral agent, since a certain sense of moral coherence, dependability, and predictability is indispensable for both the acquisition of virtues and the consequent attainment of *eudaimonia*. In that context, the concept of *eudaimonia* is closely associated with the idea of moral integrity, which is also frequently defined as a virtue. Therefore, a moral agent can never quite claim to have achieved *eudaimonia* at any given point in life, as *eudaimonia* is more adequately described as the result of an actively lived, flourishing human life. In that sense, *eudaimonia* is characterized by the concepts of wholeness, unity, and coherence; it expresses moral integrity and completeness, and thus heavily depends on the cultivation of the virtues.

In this context, a closer look at the concept of virtue becomes necessary, since it provides the foundation for the entire ethical system. The Greek word *arête*, which is regularly translated as “virtue,” literally means “excellence”; thus, virtues represent excellences of character. Generally speaking, virtues are defined as qualities or characteristics that promote the happiness and the good of a person. Accordingly, customs that do the opposite, namely, decrease the good of a person, are regarded as vices. Aristotle discusses the concept of virtue at great lengths in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that Aristotle divides the realm of virtues into two categories. The first category consists of the intellectual virtues, whereas the second cluster contains

the moral virtues. Regarding the acquisition and cultivation of these two categories of virtue, Aristotle specifically states:

Virtue being, as we have seen, of two kinds, intellectual and moral, *intellectual virtue is for the most part both produced and increased by instruction*, and therefore requires experience and time; *whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit (ethos)*, and has indeed derived its name, with a slight variation of form, from that word.<sup>28</sup>

According to Aristotle, then, virtues are fostered by education and by their continuous practice. Regarding the intellectual virtues, they are primarily defined as qualities that are vital to a person's ability to reason well; at the same time, they are valued as ends-in-themselves. Among the intellectual virtues mentioned by Aristotle are understanding (*nous*), science (*episteme*), philosophy (*philosophia*), skill (*techne*), and prudence (*phronesis*).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the intellectual virtues exist potentially in the moral agent, and have to be further refined by education. Nevertheless, since these qualities are chiefly concerned with reasoning and analytical skills, in this essay I mainly focus on the category of moral (or character) virtues. The only intellectual virtue of concern for the argument of this essay is the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom (*phronesis*). In the course of the discussion I argue that practical wisdom constitutes the "foundational" virtue, as it dynamically pursues actions that contribute to the good of a person (while simultaneously being a vital constituent of the good of the person itself).

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<sup>28</sup> Ross, "Aristotle: Ethica Nicomachea," in Jones, *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 68.

Regarding the moral virtues, they are described as character states or habits that are acquired by regular practice. For example, a person can only become just by habitually behaving in a just manner. In the same way, a person can only become courageous by displaying courage whenever demanded by a given situation. It is important to emphasize that the moral virtues are not inherent in people from birth, but need to be acquired through practice. Aristotle explicitly states:

And therefore it is clear that none of the moral virtues formed is engendered in us by nature, for no natural property can be altered by habit.... Nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, people are born with the ability to develop virtues; however, the actual cultivation depends on the appropriate training of the moral agent from an early age. Accordingly, Aristotle ascribes utmost importance to the proper education and habituation of the young. Since the day-to-day activities of moral persons acutely influence the resulting character states, activities have to be carefully chosen to promote the development of a virtuous character.

Furthermore, in Aristotle's ethics, moral virtues are seen as the mean between their excess and deficiency. In other words, courage is a virtue situated between its deficiency, namely, cowardice, and its excess, that is, foolhardiness. In this context, Aristotle acknowledges that hitting the mean of being courageous without being too cowardly or too foolhardy (rash) is difficult, and has to be practiced throughout life and in different situations. The beauty of his ethic is that specific actions can be relatively virtuous or relatively vicious; since they are



situated on a continuum, people can continuously improve their “aim” until they are able to hit the mean, which constitutes the particular virtue. At the same time, it is obvious that it is much easier for a moral agent to miss the mean than to hit it; therefore, the cultivation of virtues is arguably difficult and requires much practice and experience.

In regard to the application of virtue ethics to nonhuman entities and nature, just as Kant’s deontological ethical theory, Aristotle’s system of ethics displays a strong anthropocentric tendency, as he exclaims:

Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue, we must consider the nature of virtue; for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of happiness.... But clearly the virtue we must study is *human virtue; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness. By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul, and happiness also we call an activity of the soul.*<sup>31</sup>

In other words, Aristotle does not regard other creatures as being capable of acquiring virtues. In holding a strictly hierarchical view of the soul as consisting of three components (the vegetative, the sensitive, and the rational), he also perpetuates the traditional Western dualism between body (incorporating the sensitive and vegetative parts) and mind (the rational part). In Aristotle’s account, only human beings possess the rational part of the soul and thus are set apart from the rest of nature, which represents a form of anthropocentrism.

Contrary to Kant’s understanding of ethics, however, Aristotle does not present any moral rules of conduct in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, since his approach to ethics is decidedly contextual. At the very beginning of his

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<sup>30</sup> Ross, “Aristotle: Ethica Nicomachea,” in Jones, ed., *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 61

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

discussion on ethics, Aristotle acknowledges that his account can only be as precise as the subject matter admits. Therefore, he is acutely aware of the limitations of categorical principles that do not take into consideration the context of the moral situation. Also, Aristotle supports the common opinion of his time period that the state or the legislator is responsible for fostering appropriate habits within the citizens, for he says, “legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, a capable and trustworthy government is necessary to ensure the well-being of the entire community through the promotion of virtues within the individual citizens.<sup>33</sup>

Instead of providing binding ethical principles, Aristotle presents three criteria according to which an action has to be carried out to be virtuous. He writes that “in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly, he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly *his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.*”<sup>34</sup> Hence, Aristotle’s understanding of ethics notably differs from Kant’s deontological approach, since he does not prescribe a unified principle according to which one has to act. At the same time, the virtue ethics approach also differs from the utilitarian perspective, as it does not prescribe to act in order to promote a certain outcome. Instead, Aristotle assumes that an individual who has been rightly educated and brought up will, under most circumstances, act and live in accord with the virtues instilled within his or her nature, since he or she will “*proceed from a firm and*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> The appropriate education of children is in the best interest of the ruling power, since they represent future citizens of the society; in a way, the society is creating and forming itself through this process.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

*unchangeable character.*” Therefore, a virtuous person will apply the three criteria for moral behavior in accord with his or her own character.

Interestingly, Aristotle introduces another important distinction regarding the moral or character virtues. As Raymond Devettere states:

The character virtues ... are psychological states produced over time. They cannot be taught; they are acquired only by actual practice. If the practice originates from a person’s natural dispositions, the resulting psychological state is natural character virtue. If the practice is dictated by prudence and free choice the resulting psychological state is authentic character virtue. We develop authentic character virtue by freely making prudential personal decisions over and over again.<sup>35</sup>

As this Devettere states, the natural state of a virtue is not to be confused with the authentic virtue, as only the authentic character virtue is indicative of the development of genuine virtue. Accordingly, authentic character virtue, as opposed to natural character virtue, is highly dependent on freely made choices by the moral agent. As Aristotle claims in the passage on the three criteria for virtuous actions: the moral agent “must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, if a person is naturally inclined to be compassionate, that is still a commendable state of character; however, it is not as highly valued morally as a person who knowingly and willingly chooses to act compassionately due to his or her habituation and deliberation. In this respect, Aristotle’s position has a faint resemblance to Kant’s argument against acts based on inclinations. However, Aristotle is not as strict as Kant, who argues that one has to act solely out of respect for one’s duty, and if necessary, against

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<sup>35</sup> Raymond Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Ross, “Aristotle: *Ethica Nicomachea*” in Jones, ed., *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 63.

one's natural inclinations.<sup>37</sup> In other words, according to Kant, actions that are based on inclinations have no moral import whatsoever. In contrast, Aristotle emphasizes that acting on the behalf of inclination is not *sufficient* for the acquisition of authentic virtue, since the acts have to be performed for their own sake. Nevertheless, according to Aristotle, the cultivation of virtue goes hand in hand with the shaping of the emotions; thus, in the virtuous agent the inclinations will be increasingly in accord with the virtuous character. This feature is further discussed in the section on moral perception and the emotions.

One of the common objections to theories of virtue ethics is based on a misunderstanding of the concepts of habituation and character education. These principles are often conflated with the notion of indoctrination, which might lead the virtuous person to become a "virtue robot," mechanically performing acts purely out of habit and without thinking. Or better yet, having cultivated the virtues, the character of the moral agent would be forever "finished" and complete; moral inactivity would thus ensue. In other words, the moral agent would have achieved the "virtue state," which does not require additional improvement. However, this argument can be answered by looking at the concept of virtue from a different perspective. I argue that instead of being "blind" habits, virtues are action-guiding properties. In fact, one of the crucial aspects of virtue theory is that it is strongly associated with and dependent on action.

Despite the tendency to evaluate a person's character instead of individual moral

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<sup>37</sup> This only constitutes one interpretation of Kant's view on inclinations. Other scholars claim that the primary motive for a moral act has to be the respect for duty, but the act does not have to be against the inclinations. For further discussion on this point, see Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 86-122.

actions, virtue ethics is concerned with activity, because the actions constitute the fundamental moral training the moral agent receives. In this respect, virtue ethics is a theory of activity, of being actively involved with one's immediate surroundings. This account runs contrary to the view that virtues once cultivated are just inert qualities within a moral agent. As Devettere puts it:

First, when we say that the character virtues are "states," this does not imply that the character virtues are passive states. Just as it would be impossible, Aristotle reminds us, to consider a horse excellent if it had the capability of doing well but never left the barn to run well or to carry its rider well or to perform well in battle, so it would be impossible to consider a person excellent (virtuous) if that person had developed the states of being temperate, courageous, just, and loving, but never behaved in such a way. Although the character virtues are psychological states, they are states concerned with feelings and actions. Virtue is a decision-making state, and Aristotle says explicitly that character virtue is a decision-making state (NE 1139a-34). The states forming character virtue are not passive; rather they are expressed in what we feel and what we do.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, character virtues motivate the moral agent to action by triggering a response that is expressive of the moral perception of the agent. As mentioned previously, since Aristotle regards teaching and habituation to be the main component in the cultivation of virtues, he rejects the idea that virtues are inherent in humankind. However, he admits to the inborn potentiality for the development of virtues in human beings. Aristotle explicitly says: "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are *made perfect by habit*."<sup>39</sup> The very notion of "habit" thus requires action as it is dependent on experience. At the same time, one has to keep in mind that Aristotle demands that the action is not

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<sup>38</sup> Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics*, p. 72.

performed blindly or thoughtlessly; he expects the moral agent to deliberate and then choose the act for its own sake. Choosing the act for its own sake involves the cultivation of practical wisdom, which constitutes the “foundational” virtue and which is by definition practical and thus action-involved. All in all, the ultimate methods for the cultivation of virtues in Aristotle's ethical system consist of education and habituation, two concepts which might prove significant for the development of a new, comprehensive system of environmental ethics.

### Virtues and Their Impact on Moral Perception

One of the major problems that ethical theories face today is to determine the precise connection between the recognition of ethical dilemmas by a moral agent and his subsequent motivation to act. Frequently, philosophers argue, it is not enough for a moral agent to know ethical principles that apply only to universalized situations; something else has to occur for the agent to truly jump into gear. Simply knowing theoretical ethical principles does not provide the agent with the fine-tuned perception necessary to actually recognize a specific situation as deserving of action. This is one of the reasons why rule-based systems of ethics are problematic, as they already assume that the moral agent has discerned ethical salience in a given situation. However, that is not necessarily the case. In other words, knowing that “one should be benevolent to those less fortunate” does not give any specific information as to what action to take when one is faced with a homeless person on the street, for instance. In

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<sup>39</sup> Ross, “Aristotle: *Ethica Nicomachea*” in Jones, *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 62 (emphasis added).

such a situation, one first has to recognize that the other person has a good of his or her own, is in need, and thus deserving of help. In the same way, the rule does not provide information regarding what form the aid should take: should one simply give the person money for food? Or should one try to help in more profound ways, such as finding him or her a job etc.? All these scenarios already depend on the moral perception of the moral agent; that is, the situation first has to be perceived to be a moral one, for otherwise moral activity is not at all required. As Blum puts it:

The point is that perception *occurs prior to deliberation*, and prior to taking the situation to be one in which one needs to deliberate. It is precisely because the situation is seen in a certain way that the agent takes it as one in which he feels moved to deliberate.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, the significance of moral perception for subsequent action is undeniable. The question now becomes: What is moral perception and how does it develop in a moral agent? Clearly, rules and regulations in and by themselves are not guides to moral perception, since they only prescribe how to act once a moral situation is already perceived as requiring action. Therefore, deontological and utilitarian theories of ethics generally begin too far down the road, as they already presuppose the moral perception of the moral agent. The principles provided can only be applied if the situation has been recognized as a moral one. However, moral perception appears to be a component of the characteristics and dispositions of a person, as they are an integral part of how a person dwells in and interacts with the world. Thus, moral perception, which is essential and prior

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<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 37.

to any moral judgment, is closely linked to ethical theories of virtue, as the virtues are generally regarded to shape an agent's understanding of his or her moral environment. In other words, a person who has cultivated the virtues of love and benevolence perceives the world in a distinctly different way than a person who is lacking these qualities. As Sherman states:

Preliminary to deciding how to act, one must acknowledge that the situation requires action. The decision must arise from a reading of the circumstances. This reading, or reaction, is informed by ethical considerations expressive of the agent's virtue. Perception thus is informed by the virtues. The agent will be responsible for how the situation appears as well as for omissions and distortions. Accordingly, much of the work of virtue will rest in knowing how to construe the case, how to describe and classify what is before one. An agent who fails to notice unequivocal features of a situation which for a given community standardly require considerations of liberality, apparently lacks that virtue. It is not that she has deliberated badly, but that there is no registered response about which to liberate.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, many situations that clearly deserve the moral consideration of the virtuous person might not elicit any emotional or ethical response by the person lacking the appropriate virtue. Take, for instance, the following scenario: Kate and John are sitting next to each other on a very crowded bus. An elderly lady gets on the bus, but unfortunately there are no more seats available. All John notices at that time is that additional passengers have gotten on the bus; he barely acknowledges the presence of the elderly lady. Kate, however, immediately perceives the situation as requiring action, since she feels empathetic for the woman in need. In other words, she can recognize that the good (comfort) of the woman is in jeopardy, and accordingly decides to act. As

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<sup>41</sup> Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 29.



this example shows, the recognition of a situation as being a moral one is the prerequisite of any moral action altogether. Apparently, the particular scene looked decidedly different to John than it appeared to Kate due to their different moral sensitivities. One could rightly argue that in the context John was rather insensitive regarding the needs of other passengers, and thus exhibited some sort of moral defect, although a minor one.

At this point, it is essential to point out that the moral agent himself or herself is largely responsible for developing the proper moral perception insofar as emotional responses to specific situations are dirigible and governable. In the next section of the essay I provide more insight into the close association between moral perception and the emotions, which are integral components of an ecological theory of virtue. For now it is sufficient to acknowledge that insofar as the acquisition of virtues is almost entirely in the hands of the moral agent, the refinement of moral perception is also within the sphere of his or her responsibility.

Naturally, the next step is to determine how moral perception is acquired. If it is indeed closely associated with the acquisition of virtues, it will be highly likely that moral training in the virtues will result in the subsequent refinement of moral perceptions. As Sherman rightly argues, “perception informed by ethical considerations is the product of experience and habituation. Through such an education, the individual comes to recognize and care about the objects of ethical consideration.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, experience is crucial for the development

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<sup>42</sup> Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 31.

of ethical perception, just as it is for the acquisition of virtues. In fact, character development and the refinement of moral perception are intricately interconnected as they are two sides of the same coin.

### Moral Perception and the Emotions

The mistrust that is usually harbored against appeals to moral perception is rooted in the close connection between an agent's moral perceptions of a situation and his or her emotions about the situation. To the analytic and rational mindset of the Western world, any ethical theories that appeal to emotion rather than giving full and complete reign to human reason are suspicious. In fact, Kant argues that actions performed on the basis of an inclination are morally inferior to moral actions performed purely for the sake of duty. Therefore, he radically condemns inclinations or intuitions to the realm of the irrational, and thus less-than-human. In order to dispute these attacks on moral perception and moral feelings, a closer look at the significance of emotions to the moral character becomes necessary. Furthermore, we need to examine the connection between moral perception, emotions and moral responsibility needs to be ex. As MacIntyre states:

Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues. Moral education is an "education sentimentale."<sup>43</sup>

In this way, the moral agent is responsible for cultivating the virtues and thus

making his or her moral perception expressive of the virtuous dispositions. This character training will result in the sophistication of moral sentiments, as the emotions of the moral agent will become responsive to, and ultimately indicative of, the newly acquired character traits. In other words, the agent's inclinations are trained so that his or her emotional reactions to moral situations correspond to his or her virtues. What was once not recognized as a moral situation is now seen in a completely different, and ethical, light. Thus, the inner and outer character of the moral agent merge into one; the values that are originally cherished as ideals are gradually incorporated into the moral agent's own nature until there is no more discrepancy between those ideals and his or her own character. Naturally, this complete realization of the virtues represents the superlative of virtue ethics; it is the goal of virtue education and not its requirement. Nevertheless, a realization of the significance of correct moral perception for the cultivation of virtue can serve as a guide for moral education; clearly, character training plays into the way a moral agent perceives a situation and feels inclined to act on it. Moral perception always precedes moral judgment, which is why the development of accurate moral perception is of utmost importance.

However, the mistrust of the "irrational" emotions still remains a problem, as most ethicists refuse to base any ethical value on "fuzzy feelings" or intuitions within a moral agent. The advantage of basing ethical theory on human rationality lies in its universalizability and objectivity. It is assumed that all rational beings could come to see and comprehend the rationale underlying an ethical

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<sup>43</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 149.

principle, whereas emotions are highly subjective and individualistic. In fact, the occurrence of emotivism in ethical theory has contributed greatly to the condemnation of emotions. This ethical theory holds that all moral judgments are really expressions of the subjective emotions of a moral agent. As MacIntyre states:

Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.... Moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgments is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one. We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others.<sup>44</sup>

Emotive theory thus argues that a statement such as “this is good” is merely the expression of moral approbation by the moral agent. Therefore, the statement’s meaning is equivalent to “I approve of this action; do so as well,” which at once expresses the attitude of the speaker as well as attempts to persuade the audience. It is argued that due to their highly subjective character, emotions cannot easily be evaluated through moral judgments; it appears that there are no “appropriate” or “inappropriate” emotions for any given situation. This strong view of emotions as the sole foundation of ethical judgments has given rise to the reactionary attitude that emotions should have no part in ethical decision making. Therefore, any ethical theory that allows for the ethical value of emotions will have to answer to charges of subjectivity and particularity. How can this claim be answered? Is the moral agent truly at the mercy of his unruly emotions and

desires? Most virtue ethicists would strongly disagree with this claim. As

Vetlesen states:

Through instruction and habituation, that is, we have to learn how to master our feelings and inclinations in order to avoid being mastered by them. Feelings, admitted in emotivism to have the first and final word in all human interaction, are to be shaped and then thereafter acted on. It is only through such an ongoing process of education and habituation that we acquire the virtues; far from arising in us by nature the virtues are developed in us by our consciously activating and practicing them.<sup>45</sup>

As Vetlesen indicates, emotions are not necessarily irrational and disorderly; if one argues otherwise, one may have confused emotions with plain desires or inclinations, which indeed can be irrational and hard to control. Emotions, however, cannot simply be equated with desires, for emotions incorporate several distinct elements. After all, human beings are not forced to follow each and every whimsical desire that they harbor; on the contrary, many ethical theories are founded upon the supposition that desires need to be controlled in order to make human beings ethical at all. However, this assumption might turn out to be too radical, since it is just as difficult to diametrically oppose or subdue any given desire. If emotions indeed consist of several integral elements, then the shaping and developing of appropriate, moral emotions is possible and feasible. At the same time, if the shaping of the emotions is indeed possible, moral agents are—in a limited sense—responsible for their emotions. This latter claim goes beyond the scope of this essay; nevertheless, it is a logical conclusion to the idea that emotions can be influenced and shaped.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>45</sup> Arne Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgement: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 30.

According to a theory defended by Justin Oakley in his *Morality and the Emotions*, emotions are morally relevant. He claims that despite the fact that we cannot influence and change our emotions at will, we can still be held responsible for them. Oakley argues that emotions consist of three distinct components—cognition, desire, and affectivity—that are dynamically linked with each other. In his account, Oakley succeeds in showing that due to the three separate components of the emotions we can indeed influence what and how we feel about particular a situation. At this time, it is vital to recognize the distinction between *controlling* one’s emotions, and *influencing* or *shaping* them. Given that Oakley maintains that emotions cannot be had at will, exerting absolute control over them is equally impossible. Nevertheless, the moral agent has a degree of influence on the way he or she feels about particular contexts. Special attention in the process of emotional shaping is given to the elements of cognition and affectivity, seeing that cognition mainly involves the realm of rationality and reason, whereas affectivity most closely corresponds to what the ancient philosopher Plato would have called the “spirited” component of the soul.<sup>46</sup> According to Oakley, emotions do not skew or taint our perception of the world. On the contrary, he argues that emotions are necessary for understanding certain aspects of the world, which would otherwise remain concealed. Thus, for a complete perception and appreciation of all features of morality, emotions are not only permissible, but integral. Specifically, the aspect of emotional affectivity determines how we perceive the world, and so Oakley defines emotional

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<sup>46</sup> See Plato’s *Republic*, Book IV (435c-441c) for a fuller discussion of the tripartition of the soul.

affectivity as possessing a “perception-giving function.”<sup>47</sup> He claims that the underlying emotional affectivity not only sensitizes a moral agent to certain salient features of his or her surroundings, but additionally guides the agent’s attention, actions and desires. In other words, emotional affectivity provides the “rose-tinted” glasses through which the lover perceives his beloved, or in other cases, the black cloak through which the pessimist knows the world to be doomed. Accordingly, Oakley argues that “the psychic dimension of emotional affectivity is the mental ‘tone’ which affects us when we have an emotion, and which characteristically *permeates our perceptions*.”<sup>48</sup> It is telling to notice that Oakley explicitly holds an aretaic<sup>49</sup> position regarding the role of the emotions in ethical judgments, since he draws the intimate connection between the cultivation of virtues and the (appropriate) emotions. Therefore, the way virtues refine our moral perception is closely associated with the development of the appropriate emotions for any given situation. Those emotions, on the other hand, play an integral part in the motivation for subsequent virtuous action.

Regarding the cognitive component of emotion, Oakley asserts that “the cognitive component of emotion should be read as encompassing a variety of ways of apprehending the world, ranging over beliefs, construals, thoughts, and imaginings.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Oakley consciously provides a broad definition for the cognitive component of emotions, since he maintains that it is not limited to consciously held beliefs or thoughts. To illustrate this point, he provides the

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<sup>47</sup> Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> The adjective “aretaic” is derived from *arête* (Greek for “excellence” or “virtue”).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

example of an agent's irrational fear of dogs. Despite the agent's firm belief that his neighbor's dog is truly harmless, he nonetheless experiences the sentiment of fear upon seeing it, since deep down he still harbors the thought that the dog might somehow cause harm to him. In this context, this person has a certain way of understanding the world around him, and he thus feels fear upon encountering his neighbor's dog despite his rational belief of the dog not being dangerous.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the cognitive component of emotions can remain subconscious, and is thus difficult to control, but possible to influence.

The element of desire in emotion can consist of either conscious or unconscious desires, and generally speaking the desires might or might not be expressed by the agent's actions. Arguably, then, the component of desire in emotion is the hardest to influence and shape, since desires can arise rather unexpectedly and subconsciously. Nevertheless, desires do play a significant role in the realm of emotions and thus have to be taken into consideration for any adequate account of morality and the emotions.

Interestingly, Oakley provides an astute account of the influence of emotions on a person's insight and perception, which lends additional support to my previous argument of the intimate connection between moral perception and the emotions. Oakley argues that emotions have moral significance due to their impact on the way a moral agent perceives the world around him or her. According to this account, not only do particular emotions, such as care and interest, provide a person with a more profound understanding of certain features of the world, but additionally "having certain emotions may sometimes be

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 14.



*necessary* for understanding some features of the world, such that an appreciation of these features would be beyond an unemotional person.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, it seems that an unemotional person is lacking perceptual, and thus moral, sensitivity to the world around him or her, which emphasizes the importance of emotions for a complete and flourishing human life. Among the emotions essential for the virtuous character of a moral agent are love, compassion, interest, and care, as these particular emotions extend one’s concern to include the good of others. Oakley argues that particularly the emotion of love has the power to intensify our understanding of the world, as it allows us to “adopt the view point of our beloved—i.e. to, as it were, ‘see things through their eyes,’ and experience with them.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, by opening oneself to the perspectives of others, the world of the moral person is enriched internally and externally, allowing the recognition of certain aspects of the world that were previously veiled.

Concerning the moral significance of emotions in terms of their “wrongness” and “rightness” in particular situations, Oakley refers to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, or “practical wisdom.” As suggested earlier, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) constitutes the “foundational” virtue, since it is concerned with pursuing what is good and thus directs all other virtuous activities. Accordingly, Oakley suggests that *phronesis* serve as a guide for the evaluation of emotions because “an emotional response is right if we take it to be directed at a particular object, which *phronesis* would direct it towards here, while

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

an emotional response is wrong if we take it to be directed at a particular object which *phronesis* would direct it away from in this context.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, practical wisdom determines the appropriateness of emotions in ethical situations. As discussions show below, the significance of the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, which I will hereafter only refer to as “practical wisdom,” for ethical decision making is invaluable. Briefly summarized, practical wisdom “integrates perceptual, deliberative, affective, and practical faculties so that they operate well together.... In other words, *phronesis* guides our particular emotional response towards morally good objects.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, practical wisdom allows for the appropriate response to particular situations by perceptually acknowledging and understanding the individual context while at the same time never losing sight of the ultimate end of virtuous activity, which constitutes human flourishing. The concept and ultimate significance of practical wisdom is discussed in more depth in the section of authentic environmental virtues. For now, it is sufficient to know that practical wisdom provides the standard according to which the moral significance of emotions can be evaluated.

As these passages claim, emotions do indeed play a crucial role in ethical decision making, since they are more or less directly linked to the correct perception of a situation, and subsequently provide the motivation for action. Therefore, correct moral perception and the experience of particular emotions go hand in hand, as the component of emotional affectivity influences the tone and manner in which we perceive the world around us, which in turn directly affects

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

moral perception (what features are ethically salient to us). At the same time, if moral perception is adequately refined to perceive a situation as deserving of moral consideration, the agent necessarily feels some corresponding emotion about the situation. Thus, the relationship between emotion and moral perception is reciprocal and dynamic; ideally, it resembles a harmonious whole that is indicative of moral integrity.

### The Role of Rules in Virtue Ethics

Because of the strong belief in the importance of rules and principles for any adequate theory of ethics, new questions and concerns about virtue ethics have arisen in recent times. One of the fundamental issues of contemporary virtue theory is whether virtue ethics can be *completely independent* of moral rules. The absence of rules is indeed obvious in the works of one of the most famous examples of ancient virtue ethics, Aristotle. According to an account of Raymond Devettere, principles did not actually play a significant role in Greek ethical thought:

The Greeks would consider the modern language of moral principles (or moral laws, rules, and rights) a distraction from seeing how virtuous people actually manage to live good lives. Prudence, not principle, is fundamental. Practicing prudence is what the virtuous person does, and should do, because prudence is the only way that he can realize the goal and vision of living a good life in an ever-changing world. Principles (or moral laws, rules and rights) are important but prudence does not follow principles; principles follow prudence.<sup>56</sup>

As Devettere states, the curious absence of rules in most theories of virtue ethics can be explained by the inflexibility and static nature inherent to rules *qua* laws. Since ethical decisions are always context-dependent, prudence or practical wisdom serves as the primary guiding principle in virtue ethics. In this sense, theories of virtue ethics might be somewhat vague, but at the same time they provide the fluidity and flexibility demanded by the extremely dynamic nature of the ethical arena.

Since most deontological and rule-based systems of ethics no longer maintain their religious ties, but maintain their neat and straightforward approach to ethical questions, the role of rules in environmental ethics has come under scrutiny. In fact, theories of virtue ethics are frequently criticized for their failure to provide rules and principles according to which the moral agent should act. They are charged with being messy and unspecific, and therefore difficult to apply to real-world situations. In his article "The Role of Rules in Ethical Decision Making," Eugene Hargrove sheds some light on the importance of rules in morality by successfully drawing an analogy between the game of chess and ethical decision making.<sup>57</sup> He argues that the analogy is illuminating because of the existence of two different types of rules in chess, only one of which has an equivalent in ethical decision making. Hargrove refers to the first set of rules as "constitutive rules," which make up the game of chess itself. In other words, in changing or disregarding those rules, one is no longer playing chess, as these rules are integral to the structure of the game. Hargrove argues that these rules are readily

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<sup>56</sup> Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, p. 84.

<sup>57</sup> Eugene Hargrove, "The Role of Rules in Ethical Decision Making," *Inquiry* 28, no. 3 (1985): 3-42.

comparable to the laws of nature, as the laws of nature make up what nature is and thus cannot be ignored.

Ethical rules, Hargrove goes on to argue, are more akin to the second set of rules in chess, which he calls “nonconstitutive rules.” In chess, non-constitutive rules are contextual and flexible guidelines that inexperienced players study in order to become better quickly. According to Hargrove, these rules “serve as guides to action and not as categorical imperatives.”<sup>58</sup> As such, players are in no way required to follow non-constitutive rules, but in most cases the application of those rules will yield advantages in the game. However, Hargrove also explains that in other contexts, disregarding the non-constitutive rule might be beneficial to the player. Hence, the rules are strictly context-dependent, which supports the analogy between non-constitutive rules and ethical decision making.

Interestingly, regarding the application of non-constitutive rules, it remains doubtful that the players apply the rules consciously. Indeed, Hargrove argues that the players intentionally apply those rules only in situations where they can “detect no favorable or unfavorable consequences resulting from any possible move available—they apply a rule that they learned as a beginner for want of anything better to do.”<sup>59</sup> However, even though non-constitutive rules in chess are not applied straightforwardly or consciously by the player, knowledge of those rules does decidedly improve the player’s ability to play chess. How can this be? If the evidence does support the claim of improved playing ability, the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

rules necessarily have to influence the player's decision making, even if not on the conscious level.

In order to determine the role of non-constitutive rules, it becomes necessary to better understand the process of decision making in chess. In examining chess players during their games and observing their decision-making, Adriaan de Groot determined three separate phases the players went through: (1) an orientation and exploration phase in which the player orients himself or herself by looking at a few move possibilities and then tries some of them; (2) an investigation phase in which there is a "deeper, more serious search for possibilities, strengthening, etc., that are quantitatively and qualitatively sharply defined"; and (3) a proof phase in which the player "checks and recapitulates," striving for proof which is "subjectively convincing."<sup>60</sup> As this approach illustrates, in order to come to a decision, the player first has to grasp the board situation correctly. In order to do so, he or she tries out or "tests" several possible moves, which further clarifies the problem at hand by providing additional details about the board situation. Only then is the player able to make a decision that is "subjectively convincing," which means that the player believes he or she chose the best move under the circumstances. Much like in ethical decision making, making a "perfect" judgment is difficult due to the copious factors that have to be taken into consideration when making a decision.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.15.

During the decision-making process, the chess players explore numerous board scenarios in their minds, frequently reinvestigating their preferred moves to better understand the board situation. Instead of simply reiterating the exact same scene, though, the imagined scenario seems to change every time the particular move is played out in the player's mind. Obviously, although the process may seem repetitious and inane, trying out the same moves in their minds over and over must serve a definite purpose for the players. Indeed, Hargrove argues that since "each attempt to solve the chess problem also simultaneously further clarifies and redefines the chess problem itself, as a result, throughout the investigation the problem being solved goes through a series of changes, and the player is essentially trying to solve the problem before he even knows what the problem is."<sup>61</sup> In other words, every time the player reinvestigates a previously discarded move, he or she is adopting a new perspective of the problem. For instance, whereas the first time around he or she investigates the problem in terms of potential danger from the knight, the second time he or she might pay attention to the bishop, and so on. By looking at the problem from a variety of angles, and by taking as many particulars into account as possible, to the player's mind the board situation is continuously evolving and restructuring; this process is a matter of attaining the most accurate and precise perception of the problem at hand. Clearly, it is not viable to calculate all possibilities or take into account each and every factor, but nonetheless, much like the moral agent, the player tries to gain as much insight as possible to reach the best decision possible for any given board situation. Assuming this

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.17.

description of the decision making process is accurate, the implications for the role of rules in ethical decision making are severe. As Hargrove puts it:

In summary, the player cannot apply a rule until he knows what the problem is and he cannot do so then, because by that time he has already solved the problem: to bring forth a rule at this point is more like labeling a situation than applying a rule to it.... Although justification is certainly rule-governed, it is not at all clear that decision making is.<sup>62</sup>

In most cases, then, rules are consciously employed to justify decisions that have already been made, but do not factor into the decision-making process itself on a conscious level. Why, then, do inexperienced players improve significantly after having studied non-constitutive rules in chess? Clearly, the learning of the rules must have had some measurable effect on the player's decision making process.

In that context, it is interesting to consider Hargrove's claim that for less experienced players, the non-constitutive rules quite frequently constitute limitations rather than offer assistance; due to their lack of experience in the game, these players lack perceptual skills, and thus cannot "see" the situation on the board as clearly and precisely as more experienced players do. In an experiment conducted by Adriaan de Groot, less experienced players missed an advantageous move because it broke a non-constitutive rule that they had studied previously. In this case, Hargrove argues that all of them were limited by the rule because they were lacking crucial experience. In contrast, the more experienced players were able to look past the non-constitutive rule and consequently make the profitable move. Such players subconsciously recognized

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 18.



that the particular board situation represented an exemption to the rule, and so in these cases the correct perception of the problem took precedence over the non-constitutive rule. In contrast, inexperienced players sometimes subconsciously treat non-constitutive rules like constitutive ones, because they do not yet possess the refined perception of the situation that would allow them to see possible exceptions to the non-constitutive rule. Thus, Hargrove explains:

In this case, the players were not trying to apply rules, but rather were *simply trying to perceive the board situation correctly*. The rule entered the decision process as an element or factor in the player's ability to perceive specific states of affairs, and in this sense was functioning more like a constitutive rule than a nonconstitutive one, since the constitutive rules were also apparently structuring the perceptual process, eliminating illegal moves without any accompanying awareness.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, although the rules are usually not applied consciously to the decision-making process, they nevertheless factor into the player's perception of the board situation. Thus, it seems apparent that the non-constitutive rules in chess shape the player's perception of the board situation by both guiding and limiting them in their game. Since non-constitutive rules are merely intended as tools for less experienced players and thus serve as "rules of thumb," first-hand experience of the game further refines the player's perception of the board situation; practice is therefore crucial to significant improvement of skills. Hargrove concludes his examination of the role of rules in chess by stating that, despite the fact that rules are not consciously applied to the decision, the study of non-constitutive rules by chess neophytes is indeed warranted, "since

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

that study translates into elements of the player's perception which contributes significantly to his [or her] ability to find correct moves in actual games."<sup>64</sup>

In order to illustrate the role of rules in ethical decision-making, Hargrove chooses an example from Jean-Paul Sartre.

In this account of ethical rules in Sartre's example, rules play almost no role at all directly in the decision-making process. *The rules actually played their part, to the degree they played any part, in the young man's moral training, and, if they helped in making this particular decision, they did it through the general improvement in his moral perception long before the problem arose. After the decision was made, nevertheless, the rules once again had a role to play in justification.... The justification really invites other people to perceive the situation as applying to or fitting a particular ethical rule rather than vice versa.*<sup>65</sup>

The insights from the chess example are illuminating in regard to the role of rules in shaping ethical perception. Apparently, the non-constitutive rules in chess are generally not applied consciously to any given board situation; rather, studying the rules and then practicing the game itself results in a different and arguably improved perception of particular situations. Likewise, a set of non-constitutive rules in environmental ethics in combination with an education in basic ecological principles might be helpful in shaping and refining an individual's perception of environmental conditions. Hargrove states:

The proper approach, I believe, is to introduce a group of non-constitutive moral rules paralleling and complementing Aristotle's treatment of dispositions, which then can be studied in the same manner as nonconstitutive rules are studied in chess.<sup>66</sup>

In the last chapter of this thesis, I discuss several possibilities regarding the development of non-constitutive rules for an environmental virtue ethic.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

As the previous section shows, the impact of the development of virtues on the way the moral agent perceives his or her immediate environment cannot be underestimated. In this respect, virtue theories of ethics display a great advantage over deontological systems of ethics, as they not only serve as guides to action, but ideally transform the moral character of a person. As mentioned before, deontological ethics focus exclusively on the moral act and do not usually take the character development of the moral agent into consideration. Therefore, the moral perception of the agent does not change through the application of rules and principles, unless those rules are seamlessly incorporated into the agent's consciousness and become part of what is commonly referred to as conscience. However, if that was the case, the question of indoctrination might arise, which will not be discussed at this point. Nevertheless, since the adherence to rules and laws does not necessarily presuppose a change in moral perception, it seems that any changes that can be achieved through deontological systems of ethics are either short-lived or strongly dependent on the moral agent's impartiality and rationality. On the other hand, a transformation of moral perception would lead to profound changes in the ethical sensitivity of the agent, which would acutely change his or her way of interacting with the world.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

## Can Virtues Be Taught? The Necessity of Character Education

Regarding the lessons that can be gleaned from the ancient Greek theories of virtue ethics, Aristotle has been frequently criticized for his failure to provide a clear-cut method of cultivating virtues and educating character. Instead, he always emphasizes that his description of moral education can only be a general framework or an approximation. Nevertheless, since this essay is concerned with the development of an applied theory of environmental virtue ethics, it is essential to determine to what extent the virtues, and thus the moral perception of the moral agent, can be influenced by habituation and education. Contrary to deontological and consequentialist systems of ethics, virtue ethics is less concerned with rational precision and focuses more intently on sensitizing the moral agent to ethical salience. Mailaender exclaims:

Any advanced instruction in ethics depends therefore, on a prior inculcation of basic moral attitudes. Acquiring moral principles is not just learning to reason in certain ways, nor is it simply attaining clarity about what we think. *It is coming to feel certain ways and being characterized by certain habits of behavior.* Especially for young children, these basic moral virtues are not developed by reasoning; on the contrary, they provide the foundation for all future moral reasoning.<sup>67</sup>

As Aristotle argues, children do not have the rational faculties to consciously choose a life of virtue; nevertheless, character education has to start at a young age, as the foundations for virtue and practical wisdom have to be established early in life. Since the acquisition of virtues is closely connected with

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<sup>67</sup> Gilbert Mailaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 81-82.

the sophistication of moral perception, it is safe to assume that an education in character development should start with an inquiry into moral perception.

Although children's moral perception differs significantly from the moral perception of a practiced, and hopefully virtuous, moral agent, a discussion of how a given situation is experienced and perceived will doubtlessly improve perceptual sensitivity and moral awareness. As Nancy Sherman states:

Education is thus a matter of bringing the child to more critical discriminations. The Aristotelian presupposition is that the ability to discriminate is already there and in evidence, as is an interest and delight in improvement. What is required is a shifting of beliefs and perspectives through the guidance of an outside instructor. Such guidance cannot merely be a matter of bringing the child to see this way now, but of providing some sort of continuous and consistent instruction which will allow for the formation of patterns and trends in what the child notices and sees. This emphasis on the internal process must be central to education in a way that it remains at best peripheral to rhetoric. Though the educator persuades and exhorts, the goal is not to *manipulate* beliefs and emotions—to influence and outcome here and now—but to prepare the learner for eventually arriving at competent judgments and reactions on his own. Any method which secures rational obedience must at the same time encourage the child's own development.<sup>68</sup>

Hence, the early education in virtue theory involves a sharpening and sensitizing of the person's ability to perceive situations correctly. The parents or teacher thus serves as a guide to differentiate components of certain situations efficiently and correctly. In this context, the cultivation of the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom plays a crucial role, because it embodies the quality of being able to discern the particulars while never losing sight of the ultimate end of one's actions. As I argue in the section about environmental virtues, prudence or practical wisdom is the most basic and essential virtue, and is thus closely

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<sup>68</sup> Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue*, p. 172.

associated with the way a moral agent perceives his or her environment.

Accordingly, educational theories that discuss the cultivation of practical wisdom are of utmost importance for the development of an environmental virtue ethic.

For example, David Isaacs proposes some useful guidelines in his book *Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*. According to him, certain abilities have to be developed in children for the acquisition of the virtue of prudence, practical reason. He enumerates the following abilities as the necessary foundation for the cultivation of practical wisdom:

- the ability to distinguish between facts and opinions
- the ability to distinguish between what is important and what is secondary
- the ability to seek out information
- the ability to select sources of information
- the ability to recognize their own prejudices
- the ability to analyze critically the information they receive and to check out anything that looks doubtful
- the ability to relate cause and effect
- the ability to recognize what sort of information is necessary in each case.<sup>69</sup>

Looking at these abilities mentioned by Isaacs, it is striking to realize that they all deal with the correct perception and understanding of a situation. In this manner, the abilities necessary for the acquisition of the virtue of prudence correspond with the skills required for accurate moral perception. As claimed

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<sup>69</sup> David Isaacs, *Character Building: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Portland.: Four Courts Press, 2000), p. 191.

previously, then, the cultivation of practical wisdom goes hand in hand with the accurate discernment of the particularities of a given context. This sensitivity of perception, however, can be trained and enhanced by simple exercises. In the case of small children, for instance, the development of these abilities should start with making rather basic observations. In other words, children should be actively encouraged to practice and improve their observational skills in order to refine their perceptions of particular situations. In order to do so, a child could be asked to describe a situation to somebody else and answer questions about such a situation. In the beginning of this particular training, all descriptions of observations should remain confined to “factual” information, since the main goal is to develop a keen sense of perception.

Only in later settings should a description of moral situations be included. In those settings, an adult should serve as a guide by asking the child questions that are morally relevant in the context. For example, in order to expand his or her concerns to include the feelings of others, the child could be asked “how do you think this makes him or her feel?” or “what do you think he or she should have done in this situation?” This sensitivity regarding the good of others constitutes a fundamental component of any theory of morality, and is specifically required for the cultivation of such virtues as compassion, love, empathy, sympathy, and pity. Therefore, the refinement of ethical sensitivity and moral perception represents the building blocks for any virtue education. Naturally, this is only a rudimentary sketch of potential approaches to virtue education, and is only intended to illustrate that the accurate discernment of moral aspect of

situations can indeed be practiced. Therefore, Aristotle's concept of habituation is correct in assuming that "practice makes perfect"; any educational component of virtue ethics strongly depends on practicing the correct perception of particular situations, which in turn is founded upon proper guidance and experience. In this context, the significance of role models or exemplars of virtue for moral guidance cannot be emphasized enough. Notably, Aristotle already calls attention to this crucial feature of virtue education, since he asserts that imitation of virtuous persons ultimately leads to the acquisition of virtue. When faced with specific moral decisions, the inexperienced moral agent should look to virtuous persons for guidance, and should always try to assume their perspective and moral perception of the situation.



## CHAPTER 3

### ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUES APPLIED

#### The Potential of Environmental Virtue Ethics

Even though it appears that the concept of virtue ethics has been sorely neglected in the environmental arena, its potential application to the environmental crisis should not be underestimated. At a time when principle-based ethical systems seem unable to deal with the flexible and dynamic nature of the environmental crisis, the development of an environmental virtue ethics seems alluring. According to one scholar, the writings of the environmental movement are already rampant with a moral language that she refers to as “ecological virtue language.”<sup>70</sup> However, from the time when David Hume proposed the fact/value distinction, the integration of (moral) values, and virtues, in scientific discourse has been strongly discouraged due to their purportedly emotional and subjective connotations. To recapitulate, Hume argued that facts and values are completely distinct sets of assertions about the world. According to Hume, facts are generally gathered and corroborated through experience (even though Hume was ultimately a skeptic), whereas values are derived from emotions or “moral sentiments” that are supposedly inherent to human beings. In this manner, facts have been strongly associated with the realm of “objective” science, and values have been restricted to realm of the “emotional” and

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<sup>70</sup> Louke van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 3.

subjective. Therefore, numerous scholars still try to avoid the use of virtue language in order to maintain their status in the scientific community, which exacerbates the arduousness of introducing virtue ethics into the environmental arena. As the previous section on moral perception has already shown, the distrust of emotions and subjectivity that has pervaded philosophical thought is not warranted due to the fact that impartiality and objectivity in moral and ethical question is not only difficult to achieve but also not essentially desirable.

In order to understand the call for an environmental virtue ethics, one has to understand the differences between an ecologically minded system of virtue ethics and the traditional, Aristotelian understanding of virtues and the virtuous life. As mentioned earlier, Aristotle's system of ethics contains anthropocentric tendencies, and hence his specific set of virtues are unsuitable for a direct application to environmental issues. Evidently, the problem at hand is that in Aristotle's time, virtue ethics was solely concerned with the realm of the human, and the "good" was accordingly defined as leading a fulfilled life within the human community. Clearly, those parameters have to be changed in order to allow for a genuine environmental virtue ethic. As van Wensveen points out:

*By expressing themselves through dirty virtue language, ecologically minded people express an interest in the cultivation and transformation of their own and other people's characters. Yet unlike Aristotle and many of his followers, ecologically minded people are not interested in character development for the sake of achieving personal harmony within an existing social system. Rather their dirty virtues are tied to a social vision for the future, a vision of ecologically sustainable societies.<sup>71</sup>*

In other words, the focus of environmental virtue ethics has shifted slightly from

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17 (emphasis added.)

the motivations of traditional virtue ethics, since in addition to aiming for personal character improvement, it also aspires for severe social changes.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the development of an ecological virtue ethics is based on the assumption that social changes are necessary for the development of sustainable forms of society. In that respect, new boundary conditions for what constitutes the “good” or the *telos* have to be determined, which I discuss a greater length in a subsequent section.

Other criticisms of theories of virtue ethics include the fact that all systems of virtue ethics are strongly ratiocentric, which in itself can be regarded as an undue bias towards rationality. In this respect, especially Aristotle’s system strongly emphasizes the importance of human reason. However, it is important to note that this emphasis is due to the fact that Aristotle presumes a hierarchical structure of being. This claim demands some brief explanations. Briefly, it is Aristotle’s view that every being has a specific function or *telos*. The ultimate goal for each being’s existence is the fulfillment of its potentiality, the realization of its basic nature and function. In this manner, a being is most excellent when it fulfills its natural function to the best of its capabilities. The nature of a being is essentially the ideal that it is aiming to become.<sup>73</sup> Of course, the achievement of one’s potential nature is frequently thwarted by genetic or environmental influences. Nevertheless, the continuous striving of the being lies in the fulfillment

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<sup>72</sup> I do not want to claim that Aristotle did not strive for social changes. In fact, Aristotle’s *Politics* are a prime example for his attempts to improve the structure of communities at his time. Nevertheless, the well-being of the natural environment was never a concern for Aristotle.

<sup>73</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this idea, see Susanne Foster, “Aristotle and the Environment,” *Environmental Ethics* 24, no. 4 (2002): 409-428.

of its nature. In other words, in nature everything constantly moves from potentiality toward actuality; the ultimate goal consists of completely actualizing one's potentiality. Naturally, the question now becomes: how do human beings most fully actualize human nature? The capacity that presumably sets human beings apart from other animals is their ability to reason. In the same manner, animals are set apart from plants by their ability to actively perceive and interact with their environment. Therefore, an animal fulfills its *telos* best when it is actively sensing and interacting with its environment. Of course, the animal is still satisfying its nature when it is eating and digesting food, but the fulfillment is to a lesser degree. Due to the fact that all living beings possess the nutritive part of the soul (including plants), the animal fulfills its nature more fully if it is employing the attributes that set it apart from "lower" beings. In this manner, human beings are most excellent when they use reason, for that is what sets them apart from other beings. Therefore, the ratiocentric structure of Aristotle's virtue theory is grounded in his concept of the degrees of being and self-actualization.

Admittedly, this understanding of a being's *telos* and natural function seems foreign to contemporary moral theory; nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply a disadvantage for the development of an environmental virtue ethics, as the respect for the "other" can be rooted in recognizing their *telos* in terms of their function within a given ecosystem. Since the ecological sciences frequently refer to a creature's "function," the concept might be more readily applicable to ecological theories of virtue ethics than to merely anthropocentric ones.

As Susanne Foster demonstrates in her essay “Aristotle and the Environment,” the hierarchy of being or goodness introduced by Aristotle can be very useful for the extension of Aristotle’s system of virtue ethics to include the natural environment.<sup>74</sup> Aristotle basically equates being with goodness, since the excellence of a thing is determined by the degree that it fulfills its potentiality. In this manner, everything that is, is to some extent good. Generally, the higher the extent of actuality a being achieves, the “better” a thing is, for it is moving toward actuality. In this respect, natural things are more actual than artifacts, which means that they have a higher degree of being. The introduction of a scale of being might offend some egalitarian biocentric individualists, but I consider it helpful in regard to determining the relative goodness of different beings. Therefore, animals, possessing the vegetative and nutritive components, have more being than plants, which, in turn, have more being than inanimate nature. Interestingly, in the same manner, artifacts have some degree of being, although it is considerably lower than the degree of being of natural entities. However, in her essay, Foster compares the degree of goodness or being of ecosystems to that of artifacts, for they have less being than individual creatures, but nevertheless display a degree of being on account of their integrity and suitability. In that sense, ecosystems do have a function or nature, and thus a degree of being. Although I do not want to actively pursue the idea that we have to rationally prove the moral considerability of nonhuman entities, Foster’s approach to the development and justification of an environmental virtue ethics is illuminating, as it provides a structural basis for the ethical consideration of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 409-428.

species and ecosystems. Nevertheless, I prefer to emphasize a theory of virtue ethics that allows us to largely disregard the ethical status of nonhuman nature, even though other approaches are possible, as Foster aptly demonstrates. .

Another criticism that has been raised in response to systems of virtue ethics is the charge of extreme egocentrism. Ultimately, it is argued, the moral agent should be virtuous because it is in his or her own best interest. Since true happiness in the sense of *eudaimonia* can only be achieved by the acquisition of character virtues, theories of virtue ethics regularly emphasize the benefits of the virtues to the moral agent. Although this is doubtlessly the case, other factors besides pure egocentrism play a role in the development of the virtues. The transformation of moral perception that goes hand in hand with the acquisition of virtues through habituation should provide an answer to any charges of egocentrism. In other words, enhanced ethical sensitivity, which accompanies the cultivation of virtues, will result in the extension of one's concern to include the needs of others. Therefore, pure egocentrism gradually disappears with the internalization of the virtues. In this context, it is useful to evoke the concept of *eunoia*, which is frequently translated as "good will." However, others have linked it to the acknowledgment of another's goodness or excellence, as seeing the other as valuable on their own terms. As Foster adequately puts it: "Isn't all moral concern rooted in perceptions of others as good?"<sup>75</sup> I would have to agree with her claim, since it seems that the moral agent has to feel *something* in order to act on another's behalf. Whatever the case may be, whether virtue

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

ethics are decidedly egocentric or not, I believe that ultimately both the moral agent and his or her surroundings (including the natural environment) benefit from the acquisition of virtues, seeing that the moral agent will learn to care for and about the things he or she acts toward.

After having addressed some of the criticism raised against the possibility of an ecological virtue ethics, we now need to examine the potential implications of a contemporary system of virtue ethics for the environmental movement by comparing it to the application of rule-based systems of ethics. As mentioned earlier, principle-based ethics generally prescribe impartial rules of conduct that need to be followed by the individual in order to qualify as moral. However, as Bookchin points out, this reliance on rules carries certain problems with it:

*The discipline of rule ... demands the repression of internal nature. This repression then extends outward to external nature as a mere object of rule and later of exploitation. Unless we explore this history, which lives actively within us like earlier phases or our individual lives, we will never be free of its hold. We may eliminate classes and exploitation, but we will not be spared from the trammels of hierarchy and domination.<sup>76</sup>*

In other words, the imposition of conventions is very closely tied to the notions of oppression and domination, the very concepts that have largely caused the environmental crisis in the first place.<sup>77</sup> In order to escape this paradox inherent in the ecological systems of principle-based ethics, a closer

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<sup>76</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Cheshire Books, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> The connection between the “discipline of rule” and subsequent oppression is based on the repression of internal desires and needs by a principle that is external to the moral agent (the rule itself). Ultimately, the internal repression is projected outward, and nature becomes the object under oppression.

look at the possibilities of a system of virtue ethics for the environmental movement might be illuminating.

Whereas some traditional virtue ethics also perpetuate the conventional dualistic nature of Western thought, ecological virtue ethics demand the reduction of dualistic thinking. It is for this reason that a number of ecofeminists have already jumped on the environmental virtue ethics bandwagon, as this segment by ecofeminist Val Plumwood exemplifies:

Rights seem to have acquired an exaggerated importance in ethics as part of the prestige of the public sphere and the masculine, and the emphasis on separation and autonomy, on reason and abstraction. A more promising approach for an ethic of nature, and also one much more in line with the current directions in feminism, would be to remove rights from the centre of the moral stage and pay more attention to *some other less universalistic moral concepts such as respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship and responsibility....*<sup>78</sup>

As Plumwood writes, the domination of nature and women goes hand in hand with the focus on rights and duties found in deontological ethical systems. In this respect, strong anthropocentrism, which consists of the dualistic understanding of humanity-versus-nature, is simply not acceptable in a system of environmental virtue ethics. In the same manner, the customary opposition of virtue-versus-vice cannot be validated anymore. Whereas vices have frequently been regarded as expressions of “evil” tendencies, environmental systems of virtue ethics suggest a different definition of vice:

In sum, the dualistic opposition of virtues to vices, as forces pitted against each other, has a long history that takes us right into the present. *The ecological emphasis on holism challenges this ancient tradition.* Holism does not require the abolishment of the distinction between virtues and vices, or between good and bad. *Rather, it requires the abolishment of the*

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<sup>78</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 173.



*linkage between the virtue/vice distinction and ontological dualisms.* Thus, ecologically minded authors do not locate the roots of vice in a clearly identifiable section of reality, nor in an evil will, but they trace vice primarily to ignorance, pain, deception, or isolation. In other words, the roots of vice are imperfection and brokenness. Vice is tragic rather than evil in origin. Dealing with it is not a matter of imposing an antidote, but of compassionately addressing the causes of human tragedy.<sup>79</sup>

As this passage shows, a strict focus on holism rather than dualism is necessary in order to develop an adequate environmental virtue ethics, since the concept of oppression and domination can no longer be maintained. In this way, systems of environmental virtue ethics necessarily embrace the concept of compassion, which automatically counteracts any dualistic tendencies. Interestingly, by linking the occurrence of vice to ignorance rather than evil, the definition of vice in ecological virtue ethics closely resembles the Aristotelian understanding of vice as the result of upholding false knowledge. In maintaining a holistic focus on reality, systems of virtue ethics are encountered in many systems of Eastern philosophy and religion, such as Taoism, Buddhism, as well as indigenous belief systems. Therefore, it seems that the basic features of virtue theory are indeed widespread and pervasive, which further supports the need for a development of an environmental virtue ethic.

An important question that needs to be answered in the development of an environmental virtue ethic concerns the practical value of the ethical system itself. In other words, what is the purpose of the ethical model? Is it intended to accompany already existing systems of environmental ethics or is it intended to supplant and replace them? Is it possible for a moral agent to be genuinely

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<sup>79</sup> Van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues*, p. 27 (emphasis added).

virtuous without possessing environmental virtues? According to Ronald Sandler, all of the virtues are necessarily indistinguishable and interconnected.

He states:

The traits and/or conditions that are required being an environmentally virtuous person cannot be any different from the traits and/or conditions that are required to be virtuous *simpliciter*....

The virtue ethics provides the normative underpinnings of the environmental ethic in that the traits required to be environmentally virtuous are part of or entailed in by the traits that are required to be virtuous *simpliciter*.<sup>80</sup>

In this manner, the unity of virtue proposed by Aristotle remains intact: if a moral agent acquires one virtue, he or she necessarily possesses some version of all of them. This is particularly apparent when considering that practical wisdom represents the foundational virtue, and requires the proper sensitivity and perceptiveness of the moral agent. However, this approach to the development of an environmental virtue ethic is rather demanding, as it presumes that ecological virtues and moral virtues are indistinguishable and cannot exist separately. Arguably, this type of ecological virtue ethics is relatively difficult to ground and defend, since the logical connection and interdependence of moral and ecological virtues has to be proved. As I do not propose to establish this interdependence, I want to introduce another approach to the development of an environmental virtue ethic.

I argue that a theory of environmental virtue should have a different practical and ontological status, since it is important to bear in mind that human

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<sup>80</sup> Ronald Sandler, "The External Goods Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 25, no. 3 (2003): 283.

flourishing can only occur within the context of a healthy environment.<sup>81</sup> In that respect, a moral agent who fails to adequately care about the state of the natural environment displays a severe lack of moral sensitivity and can thus not be called virtuous. The fulfillment of the truly human life, the achievement of *eudaimonia*, is intimately connected to the moral virtues, which in turn depend on a healthy environment. In her essay “Ecosystem Sustainability as a Criterion for Genuine Virtue,” van Wensveen proposes essentially the same interdependence of human flourishing and healthy natural environments. Incidentally, I employ her ecosystem sustainability criterion for the definition of environmental virtues in the next chapter. For now, it should suffice to note that I intend to support the “weaker” type of environmental virtue ethic by assuming that a healthy ecosystem is a necessary condition for the cultivation of virtue altogether. I do not want to claim that ecological virtues match up perfectly with moral virtues, as this claim would be too problematic to defend within the parameters of this essay.

As these illustrations show, the development of a contemporary system of ecological virtue ethics requires various changes from traditional ethical theories; nevertheless, some of the conventional concepts are also preserved. Hence, it appears that the development of a contemporary system of environmental virtue ethics inevitably demands a fusion of old and new concepts, especially since it has to incorporate a dynamic component due to the inherently dynamic nature of environmental issues.

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<sup>81</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concept of “ecosystem health,” see Katie McShane, “Ecosystem Health,” *Environmental Ethics* 26, no. 3 (2004): 227-245..

## The Essential Environmental Virtues

Having established the importance of moral perception in the realm of ethical decision making, I turn now to the application of the aforementioned virtue theories in environmental education. In summary, it has been asserted that an adequate environmental virtue ethic will have to be dynamic and holistic; furthermore, it will have to focus on the development of a specific character of the moral agent by fine-tuning his or her moral perception to be sensitive to environmental situations that require ethical action. As Hargrove's essay shows, the institution of non-constitutive rules can be extremely helpful in the training of the moral agent, even if the rules are not consciously employed during ethical decision making. They rather serve as guidelines for the inexperienced moral agent, since they improve his or her understanding of the problem at hand and thus refine his or her moral perception.

In order to be able to apply these insights in moral education, several steps are necessary. First of all, we need to define the most important environmental virtues. In this context, I also introduce an account of the characteristics and values of truly environmentally virtuous agents, as these serve as role models for moral agents lacking crucial experience. Second, we need to devise a set of fairly general non-constitutive rules. The second part of the sequence is essential to the success of the subsequent educational program, since less experienced moral agents need guidelines they can easily follow as long as they are still lacking crucial experience in making ethically informed (virtuous) decisions.

The virtues needed for an ecological theory of virtue ethics will likely differ to a degree from the traditional virtues. Hence, they deserve a close and thorough discussion within the context of this study. In this section, I refer to van Wensveen's four criteria or standards for the distinction of authentic ecological virtues. Van Wensveen argues that there are definite limitations as to what constitutes an ecological virtue. In her book *Dirty Virtues*, she suggests four tests that are intended to distinguish authentic ecological virtues from their "counterfeits" or "semblances"; additionally, these tests are reminiscent of Aristotle's cautionary advice regarding his virtue theory. In Aristotle's case, he stresses the importance of safe-guarding the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom, which is fundamental to all subsequent decision making, from corrupting outward influences. Likewise, van Wensveen suggests limitations to protect and ensure the accurate distinction of authentic ecological virtues from outside corruption. The proposed tests are thus primarily intended to ensure accurate moral perception of specific situations, which is dependent on maintaining a clear and deliberate mind.

The first test is referred to as the "repression test." Van Wensveen argues that "the judgment of a repressed psyche is not a good standard for determining what is virtuous."<sup>82</sup> She compares this principle to Aristotle's statement that reason can be misguided by improper levels of fear or desire in determining what is virtuous. In other words, the virtuous person has to safeguard reason against the influences of unruly emotions or desires in order to determine what is truly

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<sup>82</sup> Van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues*, p. 89.

virtuous. In the same manner, the repressed psyche has to become aware of its repression, since otherwise the standard for determining what is virtuous is corrupted and hence not trustworthy.

The next test suggested by van Wensveen is called the “alienation test,” as she cautions against the corrupting influence of alienation on one’s moral perception.<sup>83</sup> Van Wensveen claims that frequently the declaration of one’s love and dedication to the environment is actually a sign of one’s alienation from the natural world. If the moral agent is able to accurately discern his or her status of alienation from the natural environment, he or she can prevent the occurrence of biases or predispositions in the formulation of any proposed environmental virtues.

The “guilt test” closely resembles the previous examples in that it is also intended to prevent the corruption of the ethical system from outside influences such as personal bias. According to van Wensveen, the guilt test states that the “judgment of a guilty consciousness is not a good standard of determining what is virtuous.”<sup>84</sup> In this respect, the moral agent is called upon to check him- or herself for any existing guilt within the moral conscience. In fact, existing guilt could originate from the recognition of deep-seated feelings of alienation from the natural environment, which closely links the alienation and guilt tests proposed by van Wensveen. In summary, for any environmental virtue theory to be sound the virtues have to be determined independent and unaffected by feelings of guilt.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

Lastly, van Wensveen proposed the “Fetishism Test,” which she states as follows: “the judgment of a consciousness governed by fetishism is not a good standard for determining what is virtuous.”<sup>85</sup> This test has to be examined in light of the definition for fetishism given by van Wensveen. She thus argues that virtues may lose their ethical significance when employed by a society (or an individual) guided by fetishism. The virtues of honor (having a sense of probity) and personality (having a sense of self-cultivation) serve as an illustration of that point, as they have taken on a different meaning in modern capitalist society. In other words, the “commodity fetishism” of capitalism has corrupted the original import of the virtues. In order to develop authentic environmental virtues, the fetishism test suggested by van Wensveen is indispensable. It demands a radical self-examination of the moral agent in terms of the values he or she holds.

In terms of their practical application of these tests, they serve as reminders of the corruptibility of one’s own practical reason. Van Wensveen states:

This means concretely that in our efforts to cultivate virtue we should be on the alert for signs of repression, alienation, unresolved guilt, and fetishism. The ancient Greeks described temperance as a safeguard for prudence, and ever since Western culture has been on the alert for signs of undue passion; a modern critical consciousness would prescribe self-examination, informed by critical social consciousness and followed by therapeutic as well as corrective measures.<sup>86</sup>

As van Wensveen shows, in the development of a theory of environmental virtues, critical self-examination will be the most important asset, even though the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 94-95.

applicability of van Wensveen's proposed criteria remains questionable due to their inherent vagueness and psychological impracticability.<sup>87</sup> I would strongly suggest that a firm grounding in the biological and ecological sciences will prevent most of the potential corruption of ecological virtues by repression, alienation, guilt, and fetishism. Being self-aware and critical about one's own motives and values will be indispensable to developing authentic ecological virtue.

Without any doubt, the safeguarding of practical wisdom against its corruption by external as well as internal influences is easier said than done. The above-mentioned tests appear crude and hence difficult to apply. Psychology has shown that corrupting influences such as repression and guilt are generally difficult to determine, especially if one is one's own judge (which is inevitably the case with the development of an environmental virtue ethic). Therefore, it will not be a simple task to distinguish authentic ecological virtues from fraudulent ones.

Due to the problematic applicability of van Wensveen's previously suggested "tests," I want to introduce another criterion for authentic environmental virtue she advocates in her essay "Ecosystem Sustainability as a Criterion for Genuine Virtue." In order to distinguish between authentic environmental virtues and their potential "semblances" or "counterfeits," van Wensveen employs the concept of ecosystem sustainability to serve as a parameter for genuine virtue. She posits the following simple syllogism to support her claim:

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<sup>87</sup> By "psychological impracticability," I simply mean that the effectiveness of the proposed tests remain problematic since only the moral agent is able to judge his or her own shortcomings and corruptions. This



- (1) Ecosystem sustainability is a necessary condition for the cultivation of a virtue.
- (2) A genuine virtue includes the goal of ensuring necessary conditions for its cultivation
- (3) A genuine virtue includes the goal of ensuring ecosystem sustainability.<sup>88</sup>

In order to understand this approach, the definition of ecosystem sustainability has to be clarified. According to the Arizona Forest Health Advisory Council., ecosystem sustainability is defined as: “The ability to sustain diversity, productivity, resilience to stress, health, renewability, and/or yields of desired values, resource uses, products, or services from an ecosystem while maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem over time.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, ecosystem sustainability refers to the integrity and health of an ecosystem over an extended period of time. In this context, only virtues that promote ecosystem sustainability can properly be called virtues. Since the virtuous person would have to ensure the conditions necessary for the cultivation of the virtue, he or she would have to choose actions that support ecosystem sustainability. Without a healthy and sustainable ecosystem, the development of virtue is practically impossible. Van Wensveen’s criterion is readily comparable with William Shaw’s position in his essay “A Virtue Ethic Approach to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic”<sup>90</sup> as well as Ronald Sanders’ explication in “The External Goods Approach to

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problem, however, is inherent in most ethical systems.

<sup>88</sup> Louke Van Wensveen, “Ecosystem Sustainability as a Criterion for Genuine Virtue,” *Environmental Ethics* 23, no. 3 (2001): 232.

<sup>89</sup> Arizona Forest Health Advisory Council, *Guiding Principles for Forest Ecosystem Restoration and Community Protection*, September 2003.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Shaw, “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic,” *Environmental Ethics* 19, no. 1 (1997): 53-68.

Environmental Virtue Ethics,”<sup>91</sup> since all these ethical positions define the ultimate “good” as the well being of the natural environment without which genuine virtue is unattainable. According to Shaw, in Leopold’s land ethic the concepts of “beauty, integrity and stability of ecosystems” serve as the boundary conditions for any authentic ecological virtue, since otherwise virtue is not possible.

According to Aristotle, the four main character virtues are courage, temperance, justice, and prudence or practical wisdom. Naturally, he mentions many others in his works on ethics, but these four should suffice to at least provide a general idea of the extension of traditional virtues to include considerations of the environment. The main question is how these virtues can be applied in the environmental arena, if at all. According to Aristotle, all moral virtues are the mean between their excess and deficiency, i.e., courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness.<sup>92</sup> Naturally, the mean always has to be determined in relation to a specific situation, as an action could be considered courageous in one circumstance but could be entirely cowardly under a different set of circumstances. Likewise, ecological virtues will be very much dependent on their specific contexts. Nevertheless, it must be possible to give a general account of authentic ecological virtues that fulfill the ecosystem sustainability criterion mentioned previously.

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<sup>91</sup> Ronald Sandler, “The External Goods Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 25, no. 3 (2003): 279-293.

<sup>92</sup> In this context, it is important to note that the intellectual virtues, such as practical wisdom, are generally not regarded as the mean between their excess and deficiency, since they cannot exist in excess..

Since prudence or practical wisdom occupies such a central role in Aristotle's ethics, I focus on this virtue first. According to Aristotle, practical wisdom is closely connected to ethical perception: it establishes how a situation is perceived and subsequently determines the action that is deemed appropriate in reaction to the moral perception. In other words, practical wisdom not only recognizes a situation as requiring action, it also prescribes the appropriate reaction to the situation itself. In order to do so, experience is essential, as the suitability of a reaction is always dependent on specific circumstances. In much the same way, practical wisdom will be necessary for the development of an ecological theory of virtue. In the case of an ecological theory of virtue, however, practical wisdom will require specific training to respond to a wider variety of problems, since the realm of moral virtue theory now includes the natural environment. Ideally, moral consideration would extend from purely human affairs to the interest of nonhuman beings and the environment in general, but since I do not argue for the establishment of moral status of nonhuman components in nature, a sustainable environment is still the foundation for any cultivation of virtue. In other words, a new and broader sensitivity is required by the moral agent in regard to environmental issues. In order to develop such sensitivity, a basic knowledge of ecological principles and natural processes is indispensable. Therefore, it becomes imperative to provide an education in the biological and ecological sciences for all current and future moral agents in order to ensure their appreciation and understanding of environmental problems. Furthermore, their role within the larger context of the ecosystem and the

biosphere has to be explained to them, since arguably a large component of the contemporary environmental crisis can be attributed to a general misinterpretation of the ecological function of the human species. Ideally, education in the biological sciences should start as early as possible, meaning that young children should already be exposed to ecological ideas. The sooner future moral agents develop a familiarity with these concepts and their own ecological place within the order of things, the easier it will be for them to develop caring and considerate feelings for the natural environment, which in turn will aid the development of a keen sense of moral perception. Seeing that young children are not entirely able to grasp theoretical concepts, their education should focus on tangible models; they should be exposed to nature in a play-like and enjoyable way.

In addition to a theoretical grounding in the environmental and biological sciences, one of the most important components for the development of practical wisdom is experience. Despite the fact that the following may sound like a circular argument, I want to claim that practical wisdom can only be refined by practice. Aristotle states that in order to become virtuous, a moral agent habitually has to act virtuously. Naturally, doing so may seem a nearly impossible task, as it is difficult to know just what it means to be virtuous if one needs to act virtuously first. In this respect, the power of a good example can come to the aid of the confused and confounded moral agent: if he or she knows a truly environmentally virtuous person, this person should serve as the role model of future actions. In the same way, the non-constitutive rules described in the

following section are intended to provide guidance to the moral agent who still lacks crucial experience.

The virtue of justice is equally important in ecological virtue theory. Traditionally, justice only applies to moral situations involving human beings. This field will have to be broadened to include nonhuman beings, as well as ecosystems and inanimate objects. In order for this virtue to be developed, humanity's proper place in the natural order has to be recognized. Environmental justice can only be realized when the moral agent acknowledges the importance of other beings and develops a sense of humility, which I discuss later. The field of environmental justice is in the early stages of its development, which suggests the importance of this virtue for a comprehensive theory of environmental virtue. In this context, the ecological virtue of justice refers to the recognition that the natural world does not exist merely for human consumption and use. Therefore, in order to be environmentally just, a moral agent has to take the needs of other human beings as well as nonhuman beings into consideration. In other words, the human species is not entitled to exploit all available resources. In the same manner, other creatures should not have to disproportionately bear the costs of pollution or other detrimental effects on the natural environment that are caused by the human race. Likewise, within the human sphere, poor individuals should not suffer disproportionately from the effects of pollution caused by the more developed nations. Recently, scholars have taken notice of the importance of environmental justice within the realm of human relationships.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See for example Kristin Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Justice: Creating Equity, Reclaiming Democracy* (Oxford Scholarship Online: Oxford University Press, 2002).

As far as the virtue of courage is concerned, its importance has not yet been stressed for the development of an ecological virtue theory. In the ecological sense, the virtue of courage would ensure that once an environmental injustice is perceived, the moral agent has the courage to act. This virtue clearly shows the interconnectedness of all (ecological) virtues, as the virtues of practical wisdom and justice have to be present for the cultivation of courage. Only if the situation is correctly perceived through practical wisdom and a component of injustice is present can the virtue of courage be employed. Therefore, Aristotle's proposed unity of virtues remains intact.

In order to complete the account of an ecological virtue ethic, other ecological virtues that are not included in the discussion of the four Aristotelian character virtues become essential. Since a broadening and refining of moral perception is required for a comprehensive theory of ecological virtues, virtues that actively and dynamically incorporate the nonhuman environment in the moral realm are necessary. Therefore, the virtue of respect for nature, as already suggested by Paul Taylor, seems appropriate as a foundation for a theory of ecological virtue. However, Taylor's understanding of "respect for nature" differs to some extent from the virtue I intend to propose, as he uses the concept to develop an account of duties and subsequently rules that arise out of the moral attitude of having "respect for nature."<sup>94</sup> This focus on moral obligations owed to nonhuman beings by the human species is undoubtedly due to the fact that Taylor is grounded in Kantian ethical tradition. He explicitly formulates his

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<sup>94</sup> See Paul Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," in Hargrove, *The Animal Rights/Environmental Ethics Debate*, pp. 95-120.

proposition in terms of the categorical imperative: “to put it in a Kantian way, to adopt the attitude of respect for nature is to take a stance that one wills to be a universal law for all rational beings.”<sup>95</sup> It is important to mention that despite his focus on duties and obligations, Taylor does discuss virtues in terms of “more or less permanent dispositions,” which “are themselves to be considered ‘disinterested’ and ‘universalizable.’”<sup>96</sup> In this context, Taylor’s position curiously combines aspects of both virtue theory and duty-based ethics, which is one step toward a synthesis of rule-based and character-based theories. Nonetheless, I want to abandon certain aspects of Taylor’s notion of “respect for nature,” as I do not regard them essential to my project. First of all, I do not intend to propose that the dispositions associated with the virtue of respect for nature need to be universalizable and disinterested. Apparently, the question of universalizability is important to Taylor in order to show that all rational beings would agree to his proposed theory. However, in light of the ancient versions of virtue ethics, the demand for disinterested universalizability is superfluous, since the major question concerns “what kind of person do I want to be”; in other words, the moral agent is not required to be disinterested, as the cultivation of virtue is in his or her own enlightened self-interest. In the same manner, universalizability is not really a concern, as the moral agent usually confronts particularities within a specific culture, which makes universalizability a complex issue to say the least. Furthermore, Taylor is adamant in presupposing a biocentric foundation for his ethical theory. As mentioned previously, although a shift of the moral agent’s

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

perspective will undoubtedly occur with the cultivation of virtue, absolute biocentrism is not required for a functioning system of environmental virtue ethics. Lastly, I want to point out that Taylor's account appears very simplified in terms of the cultivation of respect for nature. He believes that if he can show that all rational agents would agree on this particular attitude, moral change will follow. In comparison, I want to suggest that the adoption of the attitude of respect for nature has to be accompanied by careful cultivation and habituation and the shaping of a moral agent's ethical perception. In other words, whereas Taylor seems to propose that a person's attitude can be changed simply at will, I want to emphasize the importance of habituation and education. Therefore, although I agree with Taylor's fundamental description of the attitude of respect for nature, the ethical framework he employs differs considerably from my approach to the subject. Nevertheless, I find the concept of "respect for nature" very fitting in describing an essential authentic ecological virtue, since it seems to be an appropriate expansion of the virtue of respect for other human beings and respect for life in general.

In addition to the central discussion of the attitude of "respect for nature," Taylor provides useful expositions and categorizations of other environmental virtues in *Respect for Nature*, which constitutes an expansion of the above-mentioned essay. In the context of Taylor's discussion of dispositions, he explicitly distinguishes between "virtues of moral strength" and "virtues of moral concern."<sup>97</sup> In general terms, virtues of moral strength are more or less "self-

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 200.



oriented,” since they serve as personal guidelines (and frequently restrictions), prescribing activities that are conducive to the cultivation of a fine and virtuous character. In other words, virtues of moral strength are primarily concerned with the character development of the moral agent *without any explicit reference to others*. Apparently, then, the virtues of moral strength provide the foundation for a firm and trustworthy moral nature, and some examples of those character traits are temperance/self-restraint, integrity, and courage.

In contrast to the virtues of moral strength, the virtues of moral concern are explicitly oriented toward the outside world, and accordingly express the moral agent’s concern for the well being of others. Examples for the virtues of moral concern are the qualities of compassion, care, and benevolence, all of which hinge on the recognition of the goodness and significance of things external to the moral agent. According to Taylor, the virtues of moral concern are essentially founded on the ability of taking the standpoint of the “other,” which constitutes the foundation of all ethical systems. Obviously, the virtues of moral strength and of moral concern cannot exist independently, as both categories are intertwined and necessary for the cultivation of virtue. In other words, the moral agent can neither be explicitly self-oriented nor exclusively other-oriented; both aspects are essential to any well-rounded character development. Therefore, the unity of virtue proposed by Aristotle is maintained. In that context, Taylor proposes certain rules that are intended to facilitate as well as reinforce the cultivation of virtues. The four rules he proposes are:

- the “Rule of Nonmaleficence” (the duty not to harm any entity in the natural world that has a good of its own)

- the “Rule of Noninterference” (the duty to refrain from placing restrictions on the freedom of individual organisms and general “hands-off” policy)
- the “Rule of Fidelity” (the duty not to deceive or betray animals that are in a wild state)
- the “Rule of Restitutive Justice” (the duty to restore the balance of justice between moral agent and moral subject)<sup>98</sup>

While Taylor’s proposed rules are somewhat reminiscent of my own project, I reject them for several reasons. First, the rules are clearly founded on the concept of duty that I wish to abandon. In this context, it is worth noting that, according to Taylor, the virtue of conscientiousness, which is a virtue of moral strength, is chiefly based on the recognition of one’s duty. This strong interdependence between presumed duties and the virtues runs contrary to the account I want to develop, seeing that in my project the cultivation of virtue is intertwined with the attainment of *eudaimonia* or happiness. The ultimate goal of *eudaimonia* apparently allows for the enlightened self-interest of the individual moral agent without any reference to the concept of duty. In other words, instead of following Taylor’s argument by asking “what duty do I have to fulfill in this instance,” I want to focus on the question of “what kind of a person do I want to be/become, and how do I best pursue that goal given this specific situation?”

My second objection to the rules suggested by Taylor consists of the fact that the rules are exclusively geared to apply to “living things.” Taylor explicitly refers to beings that have a good on their own, which does not account for the abiotic (nonliving) factors of nonhuman nature. Admittedly, the virtues of concern

are rather limited in their scope, since the virtues of respect, compassion, and care can only apply to beings that can be benefited or harmed; nevertheless, some of Taylor's rules should make the interconnection between the well being of an organism and its natural surroundings explicit in order to include abiotic nature in his ethical system.

Third, it appears to me that Taylor's argument proceeds from the development of rules to the appropriate "standards of character." In other words, for Taylor the rules are of primary concern and the standards of character are only secondarily expressed by the rules. In contrast, I emphasize the primary importance of the virtues (standards of character) by developing rules of thumb that function in accordance with virtue. In other words, I hold that the virtues are the most integral aspect of ethical theory, whereas the rules are simply intended to facilitate or guide the cultivation of the virtues. Nonetheless, Taylor's attempt to combine aspects of rule-based and character-based ethical theories is commendable, specifically since the attitude of "respect for nature" seems suitable for a theory of environmental virtue ethics.

However, it is worth pointing out that a mere declaration of possessing a respect for nature is not inherently virtuous, for respect for nature requires both an understanding of what nature is, how it "works," as well as actions required to preserve the health and beauty of nature. In other words, a profound grounding in the ecological processes at work in the natural environment is indispensable for developing the proper respect for nature itself. In that context, it is important to point out that respect for nature should encompass both biotic and abiotic

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-186.

components of the natural world because the virtue is associated with a certain perception of the world as interconnected and interdependent. This particular view of nature does not have to be explicitly biocentric, for I contend that it is also possible to value natural things from a weak anthropocentric stance. In this context, my view most closely resembles Hargrove's position, since I affirm that in the case of the human species nature can only be viewed, experienced, and valued from a human standpoint; nonetheless, I also claim that nonhuman nature has value aside from its mere usefulness to human beings. Therefore, environmental virtue theory could potentially be closely allied with the field of environmental aesthetics, as it can be claimed that a certain aesthetic sensitivity is necessary for the development of the appropriate moral perception, and thus the cultivation of virtue.

Another virtue that has been suggested in environmental virtue literature is the virtue of humility in the sense of knowing one's place in the world, which is essential for the development of the virtue of ecological justice. Without knowing one's particular place in the natural world, the recognition of any ecological injustice is impossible. At the same time, in order to understand and acknowledge one's proper place in the order of things, a basic knowledge of ecological and biological principles is indispensable.

Furthermore, some have proposed the virtue of reverence for life for the development of an environmentally virtuous character.<sup>99</sup> At first glance, the virtue of reverence for life appears counterintuitive for an encompassing theory of

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<sup>99</sup> Jason Kawall, "Rethinking Communities: Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue," *Environmental Ethics* 25, no. 4 (2003): 389-358.

virtue, as it focuses narrowly on animate nature and neglects other features of the environment. However, Kawall admits that this virtue is by no means sufficient for a comprehensive account of ecological virtue theory. In addition, he clearly wants to appeal to positions of biocentric individualism. Nevertheless, the virtue of reverence for life might be slightly altered to become more inclusive. If the concept of “life” is replaced by the concept of “being” in the sense of “goodness,” the corresponding quality would be much more environmentally accommodating.<sup>100</sup> In other words, a “reverence for being” appears to constitute an authentic environmental virtue, for it acknowledges the good of another in terms of its being. Since natural entities (i.e. ecosystems, species) have more “being” (due to their “naturalness”) than artificial entities, they would merit reverence instead of being completely left out of the moral equation.<sup>101</sup> Both of the virtues of humility and reverence for being closely correspond to the virtue of respect for nature, as they all depend on recognizing nature as having a good of its own, independent of the evaluating self. Despite this obvious call for the ethical consideration of nonhuman nature, I do not wish to explicitly claim a biocentric position. Rather, I contend that both weak anthropocentrism and biocentrism can be accommodated under the umbrella of a comprehensive environmental virtue ethic.

Additionally, the virtues of stewardship have received attention in environmental literature.<sup>102</sup> It is worth noting that the concept of stewardship has

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<sup>100</sup> See Foster, “Aristotle and the Environment,” pp. 409-428.

<sup>101</sup> By “artificial”, I mean the word in its broadest possible sense, namely: “Made by humans; produced rather than natural.” (dictionary definition)

<sup>102</sup> See Jennifer Welchman, “The Virtues of Stewardship,” *Environmental Ethics* 21, no. 4 (1999): 411-425.

strong associations to the Christian faith, since frequently the relationship between human beings and the nonhuman world is defined in terms of stewardship. In this context, the use of a word with close connections to religion might be detrimental to the project, as I am not trying to propose a system of ethics grounded in religion. Nevertheless, Jennifer Welchman provides some interesting contributions to the development of a system of environmental virtue ethics, and thus deserves a brief discussion at this point. According to Welchman, responsible stewardship in regard to the natural environment involves the virtues of benevolence and loyalty. She defines benevolence as a forward-looking activity that acknowledges and promotes the good of others. In contrast, loyalty is described as a backward-looking virtue that depends on the identification of the moral agent with another. However, both these virtues are explicitly human-centered, i.e., moral agents are only benevolent or loyal in regard to other human beings; therefore, any resulting environmental benefits derive solely from those human interactions. Even though Welchman owns up to the potential drawbacks of purely human-centered virtues, she tries to point out the drawing power they might offer (i.e., loyalty to previous generations, benevolence to contemporaries, and possibly future generations). Since I am skeptical regarding the potential benefits of the virtues of benevolence and loyalty as employed by Welchman, I henceforth do not take those qualities into consideration.

Having discussed the most important ecological virtues, I now want to turn to an account of environmentally virtuous agents. As a reminder, in the case of

an inexperienced moral agent, non-constitutive rules, or rules of thumb, are useful in refining the agent's moral perception. However, another significant component of the cultivation of virtue lies in the recognition and imitation of truly environmentally virtuous persons. In respect to the character and values held by truly environmentally virtuous people, an insightful account is provided by Philip Cafaro in his essay "Thoreau, Leopold and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethic." He suggests that Henry David Thoreau, Leopold, and Rachel Carson represent the epitome of truly environmentally virtuous people. In order to provide a standard for the values held by these three persons, Cafaro mentions five important traits shared by these three environmentally virtuous agents:

- (1) A desire to put economic life in its proper place—that is, as a support for comfortable and decent human lives.
- (2) A commitment to science, combined with an appreciation for its limits
- (3) Nonanthropocentrism
- (4) An appreciation of the wild and support for wilderness protection
- (5) A bedrock belief that life is good: both human and nonhuman.<sup>103</sup>

While I agree with Cafaro's assessment overall (specifically with points [1], [2], [4], and [5]), I again want to emphasize that the insistence on nonanthropocentrism is more or less inconsequential to my account of environmental virtue ethics. However, it is once again important to note that in my view nonanthropocentrism is not equivalent to the concept of biocentrism, because I strongly feel that weak anthropocentrism is compatible with an

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<sup>103</sup> Philip Cafaro, "Thoreau, Leopold and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 2 (2000): 13-16.

environmental virtue ethic. Nevertheless, the above mentioned traits can prove helpful in selecting a role model for environmental virtuousness.

### Non-Constitutive Rules for Ecological Virtue Ethics

Having established the most significant ecological virtues necessary for an authentic ecological virtue ethic, it is now important to discuss the formulation of possible rules that would aid in refining moral perception by developing those virtues. It is important to keep in mind that these rules are supposed to mimic non-constitutive rules in chess, which are usually regarded as guiding, and potentially limiting, decision-making tools within the chess game. However, despite their guiding and limiting features, these non-constitutive rules are relatively flexible; hence, they do not resemble Kantian categorical imperatives and are strongly context-dependent. The non-constitutive rules generally play a more crucial and limiting role for the inexperienced chess player, which would be equivalent to the more inexperienced moral agent. Also, these rules represent suggestions and are by no means intended to provide an encompassing set of ethical rules for environmentally sound behavior.

As far as the virtue of “respect for nature” is concerned, the very principle of the virtue has to acknowledge one basic fact: “We are just one among myriads of species; the resources of the Earth do not belong to mankind alone.” In this sense, expressing respect is only possible by realizing the position of humankind in relation to all other things. Using more resources than necessary for life



(which, of course, is not hereby defined) would constitute a vice, since our place in nature does not warrant our unimpeded use of natural resources.

In regard to human interaction with other living beings, a helpful, non-constitutive rule for the inexperienced moral agent might be: "Do not hurt or kill any human or nonhuman being unless you have to protect yourself or you intend to utilize the non-human creature for sustenance."<sup>104</sup> In general, then, one should not inflict unnecessary suffering on other beings, even if they are intended for human consumption. This tenet would obviously lead to a condemnation of the ways that domestic animals such as chickens, cows, and pigs are often raised and farmed today in the USA and other developed countries.

Another fitting non-constitutive rule might be considered to be "It is generally more important to preserve individuals of an endangered species than individuals belonging to a common species." As this tenet demonstrates, the non-constitutive rules necessary for developing a moral perception that is sensitive to environmental health demand a basic knowledge of ecological principles.

Therefore, a theoretical education in the biological and ecological sciences is vital to the success of the curriculum. In order to develop an authentic virtue of respect for nature, another basic tenet could be that "sometimes interference into natural processes is necessary for the overall integrity of the natural system in question." An example of the application of this rule occurs when one particular species threatens to overrun an area due to a lack of natural predators. In this context, the virtue of respect for nature clearly contradicts the basic ethical

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<sup>104</sup> See James Sterba, "A Biocentrist Strikes Back," *Environmental Ethics* 20, no.4 (1998): 361-376.

premise of animal rights activism, since it might prescribe the culling of some individual animals for the benefit of the ecological system as a whole. This rule more closely resembles the ideas of the environmental ethicist, as it takes the health of the natural system into consideration. The principle underlying this way of looking at nature as a system full of processes might be summed up in the following way: "Preserving individual lives at all costs cannot always be the goal of the virtue of respect for nature." It might sometimes be necessary to sacrifice individuals for the good of the system, which is reminiscent of a utilitarian position. The virtue of respect for nature would then also embrace the idea that any intervention into natural processes should be carefully planned and severely limited. The appropriate non-constitutive rule could be formulated as follows: "Do not interfere with natural processes unless it is expressly necessary for ecosystem health." This rule would automatically make all avoidable human intrusions into the natural environment (such as littering or deliberately interfering with the functioning of natural habitats) vicious acts.

As far as the above-mentioned Aristotelian character virtues are concerned, several non-constitutive rules can be formulated as well. First of all, in order to develop the ecological virtue of temperance, the following rule might prove helpful: "Do not take more from nature than is necessary for you to live a satisfactory life." Of course, this tenet is very crude and rudimentary, as the definition of "satisfactory life" cannot easily be obtained. Nevertheless, the rule might serve as a guideline to prevent overexploitation of the natural environment by the moral agent, even if it only stimulates deliberation into what constitutes a

“satisfactory life” for him or her. One could always try to limit one’s needs to the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing, but naturally doing so will have to be left up to the discretion of the individual moral agent. Interestingly, recent studies on the issue of human happiness have revealed that once basic necessities have been met, the level of general satisfaction increases only slightly with increased economic security.<sup>105</sup> These studies thus suggest that moderation and temperance are likely possible without sacrificing overall satisfaction or happiness. Indeed, it could be argued that once ethical sensitivity has been sharpened with regard to the well-being of the natural environment, moderation becomes second nature and is not regarded as a sacrifice of any kind.

Another basic tenet that arises out of the ecological virtue of temperance concerns the issue of re-use and recycling of material. The tenet would be worded as follows: “Try to use all materials as efficiently and resourcefully as possible. Reuse material if at all feasible.” Hopefully, these rules would aid in developing a moral perception sensitive to the needs of other creatures as well as to the immense value and significance of our natural resources.

The next ecological virtue under consideration, namely ecological justice, is closely tied in to the virtue of temperance. As already mentioned, ecological justice represents the idea that the world is not exclusively made for human use and consumption. Therefore, the resulting non-constitutive rule closely resembles the rule already formulated for ecological temperance: “Do not take more from nature than is needed for leading a satisfactory life, as the natural world is not for human consumption alone.” In the same manner, another rule can be worded:

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<sup>105</sup> See “The Science of Happiness,” *Special Mind and Body Issue Time Magazine*, 17 January, 2005.

“Do not cause unjustifiable pollution or other excessive detrimental effects to the natural environment, since other species as well as other human beings will have to suffer the consequences of your behavior.” Needless to say, moral agents will still have an impact on their natural environment; nevertheless the virtue of environmental justice demands that this impact be minimized. Furthermore, the environmental costs of the use of natural resources should be carried by the benefactor of said use, if in any way possible. In this manner, moral agents would take responsibility for their own environmentally detrimental actions.

Let us now consider the ecological virtue of courage. In order to be ecologically courageous, a moral agent will first have to recognize that a situation demands action. As already discussed, this recognition depends on the proper development of the virtue of practical reason or prudence. However, once the recognition has occurred, the non-constitutive rule to be followed can be formulated as follows: “If you see a situation in which nature in the form of a living or non-living entity as well as an entire ecological system needs protection or action, have the courage to speak up for it or act on its behalf.” In order to provide an example for the application of this rule, suppose you were to witness the wanton destruction or defacement of an ecological system. Suppose a group of youths throw trash into a pristine body of water. Ecological courage would demand the moral agent (i.e., you) to go up to the group of people and tell them that what they are doing is detrimental to the environment. The moral agent might advise them to pick up the trash that they have dispersed, even under the danger of not only being ridiculed, but maybe even physically assaulted.

Likewise, if the moral agent happens upon an area that has already been despoiled, he or she might ask bystanders to give a hand in cleaning up the area. In either case, action is necessary on the part of the moral agent.<sup>106</sup>

The most important ecological virtue is arguably practical wisdom or prudence. Practical wisdom, which is both an intellectual as well as a character virtue, informs moral perception insofar as it is responsible for the recognition of a situation as requiring action performed by the moral agent. Naturally, the question as to how to develop practical wisdom has already been addressed in the previous section. Nevertheless, some non-constitutive rules may prove helpful for the moral agent lacking vital practical experience. Since prudence is sometimes regarded as being a nonmoral virtue, as it is often associated with self-preservation above all, prudential rules of thumb should promote caution and foresight. One of these rules could be stated as follows: "If a situation requires action, but you are unsure as to the precise nature of the appropriate action, let people that are truly environmentally virtuous serve as your guides." Of course, the question of who is truly an environmentally virtuous person has thereby not been answered.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, if that rule is too imprecise and difficult to follow, another non-constitutive rule to be followed could be: "If a situation requires action, but you are unsure as to the precise nature of the appropriate

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<sup>106</sup> Regarding the virtue of courage, the question of how to address and influence large corporations has been brought to my attention. Unfortunately, I have not been able to develop an adequate answer to this problem.

<sup>107</sup> Aristotle's discussion of the virtuous person can be useful in this context. In book 3, section 3 of his *Nicomachean Ethics* he states that "we call in others to aid us in deliberation on important questions, distrusting ourselves as not being equal to deciding." (Ross, "Aristotle: *Ethica Nicomachea*," in Jones, *Approaches to Ethics*, p. 71.) In other words, even if the moral agent cannot directly refer to a truly environmentally virtuous person, he or she has the possibility of deliberating and discussing with other people as to what a virtuous person would do in a particular situation.

action, always act on the side of caution.” For anyone who is even remotely familiar with the principles of environmental policy, this rule will appear to be closely related to the “Precautionary Principle.”<sup>108</sup> In one of its most famous formulations, the precautionary principle is known as principle 15 of the 1992 Rio Declaration of the UN Conference on Environment and Development. It states:

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

As this formulation illustrates, the precautionary principle is intended to stifle activities that cause potential harm to the natural environment, even if the casual relationship between the activity and the harm caused is not scientifically certain. In other words, countries are required always to act on the side of caution or prudence, and if potentially harmful activities have already occurred, “cost-effective measures” have to be undertaken by the country or state in question. Naturally, since in the above formulation the precautionary principle strictly applies to entire countries or states, the non-constitutive rule reinforcing the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom has a slightly different scope. Nevertheless, just like the precautionary principle prescribes, one should always act in the name of caution, even if some of the outcomes of an action are not scientifically proven one way or another. Another formulation of the precautionary principle demonstrates its wide usage and variation: “When an activity raises

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<sup>108</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the precautionary principle, see Neil Manson, “Formulating the Precautionary Principle,” *Environmental Ethics* 24, no. 3 (2002): 243-262.

threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically."<sup>109</sup> It has been argued that this principle is sufficiently vague to let perpetrators off the hook, but nevertheless this statement gives an indication that environmentally speaking not all effects of any action taken can be predicted. Therefore, even though a basic understanding of ecological concepts is necessary for the establishment of an ecological theory of virtue, it cannot serve as a guarantee that all actions henceforth taken will be environmentally sound. If any doubts arise, one should always act in a prudent manner in order to minimize any adverse effects on either human beings or the environment.

Another non-constitutive tenet that might prove helpful for the inexperienced moral agent concerns the acquisition of experiences. It might be formulated as follows: "Personal experience of and familiarity with the natural environment is generally preferable to mere theoretical knowledge of ecological principles." Or, formulated differently: "Theoretical knowledge of ecological principles and concepts should generally be accompanied and enhanced by a set of practical experiences to make them more meaningful and applicable." More precisely, it is not sufficient to learn about the intricate ecological relationships within an ecosystem without going out and looking at different types of ecosystems and their natural components. Only by experiencing the "real thing" can the necessity of preserving an ecosystem in its entirety be understood properly. Despite the

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<sup>109</sup> Taken from the Wingspread Consensus Statement. This formulation of the principle was stated at Wingspread, headquarters of the Johnson Foundation, January 1998 in Racine, Wisconsin, at a meeting of lawyers, scientists, policy makers and environmentalists.

fact that the previously suggested non-constitutive rules appear very vague, it seems impracticable to achieve greater precision. In fact, the rules have served their purpose if they provide general guidance and improve the perception of the specific situation.

In conclusion, the role of rules in the development of human qualities that foster sensitivity to man's role in the world should not be underestimated. These regulations, however, should only serve as rules of thumb, as they are not intended to be categorical imperatives. Indeed, because the rules are context-dependent, they can by no means be regarded as universally appropriate guidance. Ultimately, environmental issues are of a highly fluid and dynamic nature, which demands a certain flexibility in any appropriate system of environmental ethics. The proposed rules are approximations, intended for moral agents lacking crucial experience.



## CONCLUSION

The field of environmental virtue ethics has increasingly come to the attention of environmental philosophers because of its potential to circumvent difficulties arising from the language of rights, duties, and moral claims.

The advantages of virtue ethics compared to rule-based theories of environmental ethics can be seen in its focus on character development, which in turn causes a transformation in moral perception. Therefore, environmental virtue ethics does not have to explicitly establish moral considerability for the nonhuman world (even though it is possible). Environmental virtue ethics can be justified by asserting that any authentic virtue must fulfill the criterion of ecosystem sustainability, since a sustainable, healthy environment is both a prerequisite of and a goal for the cultivation of virtue.

In conclusion, I want to propose a preliminary hierarchy of the ecological virtues I consider most important. Naturally, this list is by no means comprehensive, and since I uphold the “unity of virtue” (i.e., if a moral agent possesses one virtue, he or she possesses some version of all of them), any ecological virtues missing from this catalog should not thereby be disregarded. Following Taylor’s discussion of virtues, I also propose to subdivide the virtues into the categories of “virtues of moral strength” and “virtues of moral concern,” since a distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented dispositions appears helpful. Regarding the “virtues of moral strength,” I argue that moral integrity constitutes the most fundamental and essential disposition, since it refers to the

harmony and congruence between a moral agent's thoughts, words, and actions. In other words, I contend that by developing moral integrity, which in my eyes is the very basis for moral strength, the remaining virtues of moral strength automatically ensue. In a similar manner, I regard compassion as the foundation for all moral concern, as it is this specific disposition that recognizes the importance and the value of the others. Moreover, compassion is very broad in its scope, since, as Taylor puts it, "compassion extends to all living things that suffer, whatever the cause of their suffering."<sup>110</sup> Of course, compassion is limited to the realm of beings that have the capacity for suffering (sentience), which does not include abiotic (nonliving) nature. Nevertheless, the basic recognition of the significance and the goodness of things or beings external to the moral agent remains essential to the entire ethical project. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of the significance of others lays the groundwork for the virtues of respect, humility, and benevolence, and is thus the foundation for all subsequent moral concern.

Ultimately, I claim that the most vital and fundamental ecological virtue is practical wisdom, which in turn is heavily dependent on both (theoretical) knowledge and experience. In fact, I contend that practical wisdom is the basis for all other virtues, because it is this specific disposition that enables the moral agent to keep sight of the ultimate goal of the ethical life (the "good" or *eudaimonia*) while facing particular situations. With the development of practical wisdom, the moral perception of the individual agent changes and becomes more

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<sup>110</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*," p. 207.

sensitive and attuned to the natural environment. Practical wisdom thus constitutes the foundational virtue that all other dispositions hinge on.

Ultimately, the great potential of virtue ethics lies in its attempt to sensitize moral agents to their proper place in the world. Ideally, through a refinement of moral perception, which accompanies the cultivation of environmental virtues, the moral agent recognizes the importance of all components of nonhuman nature for human flourishing. Although the proposed environmental virtue ethic is not intended to be explicitly biocentric, a more holistic perspective of humanity's place in nature should automatically arise. In this respect, the environmental virtue ethics would ideally encompass some aspects of biocentrism (i.e., life has non-instrumental value) and weak anthropocentrism (i.e., human beings still experience and value the nonhuman world from a human perspective). The main goal of an ecological virtue ethic lies in the cultivation of a moral character that displays sensitivity to the natural world. The change of moral perception that is intimately associated with the cultivation of virtue can accommodate for that necessity.

As far as the future of environmental virtue ethics is concerned, more research and discussion of this ethical theory is necessary to determine its ultimate potential for application in environmental education. However, its capacity to sensitize moral agents to environmental issues seems unique, and should be utilized. In my opinion, the next step for environmental virtue ethicists lies in the exploration of the system's practical application. In other words, further research should be concerned with the possibilities of devising an educational

theory that heavily emphasizes character development. This educational theory necessarily would have to incorporate insights from the ecological and biological sciences, and provide for first-hand experience of the natural world.

All in all, I am certain that environmental virtue ethics can provide an umbrella for diverse ethical factions due to its inherent flexibility. Doubtlessly, environmental virtue ethics is still in the very early stages of its development, but its potential for future application looks promising.

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