Climate Change and Virtue Ethics

Enrico Galvagni (*University of St Andrews*)

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Abstract: Over the past two decades, virtue ethicists have begun to devote increasing attention to applied ethics. In particular, the application of virtue ethical frameworks to the environmental ethics debate has flourished. This chapter reviews recent contributions to the literature in this field and highlights some strengths and weaknesses of thinking about climate change through a virtue ethical lens. In section 1, I explore two benefits of applying virtue ethics to climate change: (a) we can better capture the phenomenology of our moral experience, and (b) we avoid the problem of inconsequentialism. In section 2, I analyse various practical proposals that have been put forward in the form of specific environmental virtues. In section 3, I reconstruct a fundamental objection to the idea of using a virtue ethical normative approach to tackling the urgent and imminent dangers of climate change.

Keywords: virtue ethics; virtue theory; climate change; character; environmental virtues; green virtues; inconsequentialism.

Introduction

Virtue ethics is usually defined as an ethical theory in which (1) the virtues (morally good, excellent, or prizeworthy character traits) play a salient role; and (2) the virtues are taken to be the fundamental concepts of ethics and are not defined in term of some other concepts (such as consequences, duty, etc.; see Driver 1998; Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2022). Such an approach to ethics has gained more and more traction in the past few decades and is now taken to be one of the main ethical theories rivalling consequentialism and deontology. In line with this increasing attention towards virtue and character, philosophers have begun to use virtue ethical frameworks to think about problems in applied ethics. Environmental virtue ethics is a result of this recent development.

A handful of forerunners, such as Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), and Rachel Carson (1907–1964), started thinking about environmental ethics in terms of virtue and character well ahead of their time. However, the field of environmental virtue ethics is a newcomer to the academic debate. Only twenty years ago, scholars could still truthfully affirm: "little has been written in environmental ethics from a virtue ethics perspective" (Cafaro 2001: 3). Two decades later, this has changed substantially.

While some work had been done in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Hill 1983; O'Neill 1993), the academic debate started to attract a great deal of attention only from the early 2000s, with the publication of some books now considered milestones in the field: Louke van Wensveen's *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (2000); Philip Cafaro's *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (2004); and Ronald Sandler's *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (2007). Soon after, some of the leading virtue ethicists, such as Rosalind Hursthouse and Christine Swanton, assumed the task of demonstrating how virtue ethics could be used to rethink the relationship between human beings and nature (Hursthouse 2007; Swanton 2010). In a few years, environmental virtue ethics went from being a "small but growing field" (Welchman 1999: 414) to an "indispensable" and "vibrant area of environmental ethics" (Sandler 2013: 8).

Despite this burgeoning development, the contributions devoted to the application of virtue ethics to the specific problem of climate change remain rare. In a recent paper, Dominic Lenzi laments that "virtue ethics has been largely absent from [the] debate" (Lenzi 2022: 1) surrounding climate change. While the academic papers devoted to environmental virtue ethics are now innumerable, the virtue ethical study of the specific phenomenon of climate change has not been a primary area of research. Before proceeding further, it is important to understand why this is the case.

Environmental approaches of the kind proposed by virtue ethicists are more holistic than normative approaches which are primarily based on rights or consequences. Rather than studying and developing a possible solution to climate change as a specific problem, virtue ethicists have often focused on how cultivating certain character traits contributes to improve the "ethical relationships between human beings and the natural environment" (Sandler 2013: 1). It is hoped that this will also contribute to mitigating climate change and its effects. However, climate change specifically is not often discussed by environmental virtue ethicists. Given the focus on virtues and character that virtue ethicists adopt, cultivating environmental virtues is not thought of as a way to solve *specific* problems but rather is taken to be a more profound attempt to reconceive the place of human beings in relation to the natural world. In other words, this approach conceives of the virtues as a solution to something wider than the problem of climate change.

This is why most scholars shaping the debate surrounding the application of virtue ethics to environmental issues have rarely written about climate change. Their holistic approach is the reason why environmental virtue ethics, rather than being merely an application of virtue ethics to a set of specific problems, has emerged in recent years as a branch of virtue ethics itself. Some environmentalists now argue that one cannot simply develop a virtue ethics based on *human* flourishing and then apply it to environment. Rather, the fact that human beings' happiness and well-being is influenced by the way we live and respond to our environment makes it so that environmental concerns must be built into our basic normative concepts. This is why Philip Cafaro, one of the most prominent scholars in the field, affirms that environmental virtue ethics "both deepens our understanding of environmentalism and gives us a better sense of what it would really mean to be benevolent, temperate, properly humble or wise people" (Cafaro 2015: 438). In order to have a proper theory of the virtues, we need to have an environmentalist approach to virtue ethics. But what

are the benefits of such an approach to our management of the real and urgent problem of climate change?

Section 1 – Two Benefits of Virtue Ethical Approaches to Climate Change

Although the literature explicitly devoted to virtue ethics and climate change is dwarfed by that on environmental virtue ethics more generally, two main benefits of virtue ethical approaches to climate change can be identified. A virtue ethical approach to this problem (1) better captures our moral phenomenology and aligns to our everyday experience; and (2) provides a tool against the problem of inconsequentialism, namely that individual actions have no direct, clear and measurable impact on climate change. It is my task in this section to briefly present these two points in turn.

1.1 Virtue Ethical Approaches Capture Our Moral Phenomenology

The first benefit of a virtue ethical approach to climate change is that it successfully captures our moral phenomenology. This benefit is often highlighted by virtue ethicists not only in relation to climate change ethics, but also with respect to virtue ethics in general. A moral theory based on virtue, they argue, provides us with a more accurate description of our moral experience than rival theories such as consequentialism and deontology.

Environmental virtue ethicists think of their approach as one that is able to capture our common sense and everyday moral intuitions more adequately than competing moral theories. For instance, one of the first and most influential academic papers on environmental virtues – Thomas E. Hill Jr's "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments" – opens with an attempt to understand what is wrong with a "wealthy eccentric" who recently

"bought a house … surrounded by a beautiful display of grass, plants, and flowers, and it … shaded by a huge old avocado tree" and decided to "cut the whole lot down and covered the yard with asphalt" (Hill 1983: 211). Hill thinks that as long as we look for consequences and right infringements, we will struggle to find anything objectionable in his behaviour (suppose he enjoys the new view more than the one of the old tree, that no one has been harmed in the process, etc.). And yet, we feel some "moral discomfort" when presented with these facts. Hill's suggestion is often taken to be the initiatory gesture of environmental virtue ethics: in cases like this, "we may not regard an act wrong at all though we see it as reflecting something objectionable about the person who does it" (Hill 1983: 215). Our moral reaction of discomfort at the wealthy eccentric's acts, Hill believes, is explained by realising that what is morally objectionable is not the man's *action* but rather his *character*.

This is an aspect stressed by many other proponents of a virtue ethical approach to environmental ethics. For instance, Philip Cafaro (2001) argues that the forerunners of environmental virtue ethics (Thoreau, Leopold, Carson) all thought that people conceive of the ideal relationship between human beings and nature in terms of virtue and character. Ronald Sandler confirms this by affirming that virtue concepts are "more subtle and rich evaluations of both character and conduct than the standard deontological and consequentialist categories" (Sandler 2013: 3) and are more representative of the way human beings think of environmental issues. Sophie-Grace Chappell stresses the same point: the description of climate emergencies "produces responses in us that are very natural to talk about in the vocabulary of the virtues" (Chappell 2020: 178).

When people think about their interaction with the natural environment, they tend to use aretaic concepts, which are both evaluative and descriptive (such as 'selfish', 'disrespectful', 'cruel', 'careful', 'considerate', 'sensitive', 'grateful', etc.), rather than deontic ones, which are merely evaluative ('right', 'wrong', 'permissible', 'impermissible',

'obligatory', etc.). For instance, most people would not judge someone going for a high-emission fun ride on a Sunday afternoon in the deontic terms of obligation or prohibition. Rather they rely on aretaic concepts and identify the agent of such an action as selfish, inconsiderate, disrespectful, and so on. Virtue ethicists claim that an ethical theory that adopts these terms as central ethical concepts will be in a better position to describe, persuade and motivate individual agents to act in certain ways.

In the case of climate change, for instance, virtue ethical approaches assert that our moral judgments are usually aimed at people's characters rather than to the consequences of their actions. Each individual act may not have any relevant consequences in exacerbating climate change but is not, therefore, irrelevant to the problem. The aretaic concepts of virtues and vices apply nonetheless to the agent in question. This leads us to the second and more substantial benefit of a virtue ethical approach to climate change.

1.2 Virtue Ethical Approaches Can Tackle the Problem of Inconsequentialism

A second benefit of virtue ethical approaches to climate change is that they can provide a solution to the problem of inconsequentialism. Although there is widespread agreement in the research community that climate change is caused by collective human activity, it is controversial whether we can attribute individual responsibility for it. Many prominent scholars argue that there is no causal connection between one individual's emissions and the global phenomenon of climate change. One individual's emissions do not make any causal difference to climate change, if considered in themselves. Famously, some philosophers have argued that this implies that going for a high-emission fun ride on a Sunday afternoon is not something that is morally bad (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005; cf. Barry and Øverland 2015; Galvin and Harris, 2014, among others). The problem of inconsequentialism can be put simply: if one's emissions do not make any relevant or noticeable difference in the production or

prevention of climate change, why should we blame or praise individuals for their environmentally objectionable actions?

Various philosophers have argued that a virtue ethical approach fares substantially better than other accounts when presented with this problem. This is so because virtue ethics affirms that we should conceive of some actions as bad even if they have no causal connection to climate change, as long as they manifest some vice or lack of virtue. On such proposals, we can rightfully affirm that an inconsequential high-emission fun ride is bad because it is a manifestation of indifference, selfishness, and arrogance when performed by someone who is aware of the existence of climate change and the harm it produces. The fact that there is no direct or causal connection between the individual action and the harmful consequences of climate change is irrelevant to our judgments about the agent who performed the vicious action. This is likely to be the most promising advantage that virtue ethics has to offer to the debate on climate change. It is therefore worth exploring a few formulations of this point.

The first attempt to apply a virtue-based framework to climate change is in Dale Jamieson's "When Utilitarians Should Be Virtue Theorists" (2007). After presenting various reasons why other theories (Kantianism, Contractualism, Act-utilitarianism, etc.) all have troubles when dealing with "the world's biggest collective action problem" (2007: 165), Jamieson argues that "non-contingency" should be a feature of a moral theory able to present a possible solution to climate change. The idea of non-contingency is that various agents should "act in ways that minimize their contributions to global environmental change" but their "acting in this way should generally not be contingent on an agent's beliefs about the behavior of others" (2007: 167). According to Jamieson, such a feature is best achieved by a moral theory that is centred around virtue rather than a calculation of consequences. As he puts the point, "[i]nstead of looking to moral mathematics for practical solutions to large-scale collective action problems, we should focus instead on non-calculative generators of behavior:

character traits, dispositions, emotions and what I shall call 'virtues'" (2007: 167). Regardless of what others choose to do, we should minimise our emissions. Developing certain virtues (we will see in the next section a list of them) is the most effective way to deal with a phenomenon such as climate change. This is because it is produced by the collective actions of many, over various generations, and on a global scale.

Jamieson's proposal, however, is not to adopt virtue ethics but that in order to achieve the best results in a world affected by climate change, "utilitarians should be virtue theorists" (2007: 180). In the opening lines of this chapter, I have given two conditions for a theory to be a form of virtue ethics. According to Jamieson, the second of those conditions is not necessary for an ethic to achieve positive environmental results. In other words, while Jamieson argues forcefully that moral theories should integrate a discussion of what he calls the 'green virtues', he admits that we can define those virtues in terms of a more fundamental ethical concept: consequences. As such, his proposal counts as a form of virtue-consequentialism rather than virtue ethics.

In a later paper, Roland Sandler also voices his dissatisfaction with the ways in which act utilitarian and Kantian ethics attempt to deal with environmental concerns. Sandler takes climate change specifically as "the paradigmatic longitudinal collective action environmental problem" (Sandler 2010: 168) and argues that "justifications for making the effort to respond to longitudinal collective action environmental problems are, on the whole, particularly well supported by virtue-oriented normative theories" (Sandler 2010: 167). His point, similar to Jamieson, is that, on one hand, act utilitarians will struggle to justify the moral prohibition of certain inconsequential actions (such as driving a high-emission car for fun), since these actions cause pleasure in the rider and no harm to others. On the other hand, Kantian ethics will struggle to account for the fact that climate change emerges as a by-product of certain activities and does not imply treating others as mere means or having an attitude of disrespect

towards them. Sandler's conclusion is that "environmental ethicists should be virtue-oriented ethicists, rather than non-virtue-oriented utilitarians or Kantian ethicists" (Sandler 2010: 182). While Sandler's sympathy is towards a virtue ethical approach, the problem of inconsequentialism can be solved by the adoption of any "virtue-oriented normative theory [which] evaluates actions according to what a person's dispositions ought to be (i.e., in terms of what is the virtuous thing to do)" (2010: 182).

Developing a line of thought similar to Jamieson (2007) and Sandler (2010), in a recent paper, Dominic Lenzi argues that "we do not require a causal account of the harmful action that each individual contributes in order to justify moral responses" (Lenzi 2022: 3). This is because "[a]ll that virtue ethical views require is that characteristic ways of living can produce climate harms" (Lenzi 2022: 4) and this is taken to be uncontroversial. If we think of climate change as a product of people's vices, which we often do (see section 1.1), "their correct attribution implies a judgment of moral blame" (Lenzi 2022: 8). In other words, "[f]ailing to do what we can … is morally blameworthy, because it reflects vices of injustice, callousness, indifference, and so on" (Lenzi 2022: 8) rather than because it generates bad consequences. His conclusion is that a virtue-oriented ethic, either in the form of virtue ethics or virtue consequentialism, will best deal with the specific nature of climate change.

While these proposals differ in some respects, they are unified by the idea that a global collective action problem can be best dealt with by a moral theory that integrates some environmental virtues. The problem of inconsequentialism usually being considered an obstacle when tackling climate change, can be avoided by focusing on character and the virtues rather than consequences and rights.

It is worth noticing here, however, that the characteristic advantage of thinking about climate change with a virtue-oriented approach does not necessarily imply the necessity of

virtue ethics as defined in the introduction. A virtue consequentialist approach would be just as effective. Consequentialists and utilitarians could develop their theories into indirect proposals that adopt the virtues as tools to maximise utility (cf. Driver 2001; 2020). Jamieson's claim seems to be that, by utilitarian standards, one should adopt a virtue-based approach to the problem of climate change. Similarly, Sandler admits that "[t]he broader theoretical context or meta-normative underpinnings of [his proposed virtue-oriented] normative theory could be virtue ethical (e.g., neo-Aristotelian) or utilitarian (e.g., virtue utilitarian)" (2010: 169). In other words, the benefits that they identify in the application of virtue ethical frameworks to the problem of climate change also appertain to virtue consequentialist or virtue utilitarian theories.

Section 2 – A Catalogue of Environmental Virtues

In the previous section, we have explored two benefits of a virtue-based approach to climate change. In order to achieve such benefits, most environmental virtue ethicists have worked to identify and describe a number of character traits that we ought to cultivate in order to improve our relationship with the natural environment. According to Roland Sandler, as well as many other environmental virtue ethicists, "providing substantive accounts of environmental virtues and vices is crucial to generating the normative resources" (2013: 8) of this moral theory.

In her seminal paper "Environmental Virtue Ethics" (2007), Rosalind Hursthouse has argued that a list of environmental virtues will likely include two kinds of items. First, it will include old virtues reconceived and integrated within an environmentalist theory; and second, it will develop new virtues that have not yet been identified.[1] Following Hursthouse, in this

[1] This quest for new virtues, in turn, can be conducted in various ways. Sandler (2013) and Lenzi (2017), for instance, show that one can look for new virtues focusing on finding some character traits that are (1) beneficial

section, I review (1) some of the old virtues that have been reconceptualised as environmental virtues; and (2) other brand-new virtues that have emerged in relation to recent concerns with the natural environment. It is important to keep in mind, however, that almost every virtue can be given an environmental spin. My list in this chapter, therefore, should not be taken as an exhaustive account. Rather, it includes *some* of the virtues that have received more traction in recent years.[2]

Before we review some of the most prominent environmental virtues, it is worth stressing that the adoption of different normative frameworks will yield different results. If we endorse a virtue-based consequentialist proposal, along the lines developed by Jamieson or Driver, we will include in our list of environmental virtues only those character traits that generally produce the best consequences. On such a view, the test that a character trait needs to pass to be counted as a virtue consists of asking: does the cultivation of this trait produce the best consequences? Differently, a virtue ethical approach that takes the virtue concepts to be fundamental moral notions may use different criteria to discriminate between virtues, vices, and indifferent character traits. For instance, a character trait could be counted in the list of virtues merely because it expresses mental states that are morally good, regardless of whether they reliably produce good consequences (e.g., Slote 2001). Depending on which ethical framework we choose, a list of green virtues will include or exclude certain items. The selection of green virtues analysed below includes some of the most common and least controversial examples of character traits that will improve the general relationship between human beings and the environment. Without being explicit about this, most virtue ethicists seem to believe that these virtues will also contribute to solving climate change.

for both human beings and the environment; (2) beneficial to human flourishing in virtue of their being a part of nature; or (3) by focusing on virtuous exemplars.

[2] Already in her early *Dirty Virtues* (2000), Louke van Wensveen provided an appendix listing almost 200 environmental virtues.

2.1 Old Virtues Reconceived

Benevolence is one of the traditional virtues that is most likely to have an important impact on our treatment of the environment. As Jennifer Welchman has argued: "[b]enevolent interest in our own descendants is a powerful motivator" and can provide proactive behaviour in creating "initiatives designed to maintain or improve environmental quality" (Welchman 1999: 416). "Environmental benevolence" is also proposed, analysed and developed by Geoffrey Frasz, who argues that an "environmentally good person takes an active interest in promoting the flourishing of all the other members that make up the land" and not only of human beings. "This expansion of the sphere of concern to nonhuman others" is the key feature of "environmental benevolence" (2005: 126). Benevolence of this environmental sort is also an "active concern for whole species and particular places, biogeographic zones, ecosystems, and watersheds" (2005: 126) in addition to a concern for other people's welfare. Benevolence as an environmental virtue, therefore, is taken to be a form of traditional benevolence whose scope of action and concern has been expanded to people that do not yet exists as well as non-human creatures.

Gratitude is another virtue that, if reconceived in an environmental way, is often seen as a contribution to ecological goals. While a disposition to feel appropriate gratitude is traditionally conceived of as a virtue that involves only other people whose intentions are the object of gratitude, environmental virtue ethicists have tried to reconceptualize gratitude to include nature and the environment. For instance, Karen Bardsley has explored "possible grounds for feelings of gratitude, or a sentiment closely akin to gratitude, toward the natural environments that support human life" (2013: 28). Bardsley argues that intentional actions are not necessary for gratitude to be appropriate, and that gratitude is therefore owed to non-human creatures and environments too. Among other recent contributions on this virtue, Nathan Wood has argued that conceiving of "gratitude as an environmental virtue" (2020:

483) requires that one "actively wills [nature] to be what it is" (2020: 483). In this way, gratitude is expanded into becoming a disposition to accept and value the otherness of nature for its own sake rather than because of an advantage that it procures to human beings.

Humility is a virtue that traditionally concerns social interactions among persons. Nonetheless, environmental virtue ethicists have insisted that one of the character flaws most common among people who mistreat the environment and the natural world is arrogance or the lack of proper environmental humility. In the words of Thomas E. Hill: "The Alps, a storm at sea, the Grand Canyon, towering redwoods, and 'the starry heavens above' move many a person to remark on the comparative insignificance of our daily concerns and even of our species, and this is generally taken to be a quite fitting response. What seems to be missing, then, in those who understand nature but remain unmoved is a proper humility" (1983: 219). Hill believes that someone who "viewed all nonsentient nature simply as a resource" (1983: 220) is psychologically very likely to lack humility, to conceive of themselves as the dominator or the possessor of nature, ignoring the detrimental effects that these vices have on the environment. More recently, environmental humility has been developed as one of the central green virtues and as an antidote to the detrimental effects that humanity has on the natural world (Gerber 2002; Pianalto 2013; Pulkki 2022).

Temperance is another virtue that, albeit present in many traditional accounts, has recently been valued in environmental ethics. Often recast in the form of 'simplicity', temperance is seen as a character trait that contributes to both individual happiness and the harmonic life of the natural environment. Gambrel and Cafaro detail their account of 'material simplicity' as the combination of "the knowledge of what is truly enjoyable, fulfilling, and meaningful in life; and the wisdom to know when enough is enough" (2009: 86). Someone who cultivates the virtue of temperance or simplicity will not let themselves be swallowed up by the constant need of new material commodities. Temperance in its environmental extension

is a cure to the vices of acquisitiveness and greed. Simplicity in this context is famously advocated by Henry David Thoreau, a convinced believer that "[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Thoreau 1951, quoted in Sandler 2013: 1). A specific application of the virtue of temperance to the issue of eating meat is provided in Halwani (2022).

Other traits could be added to this list of traditional virtues reconsidered in an environmental light, including hope (Kretz 2013); patriotism (Cafaro 2010); and courage (Fredericks 2014).

2.2 New Virtues

Among the new virtues that have been developed in relation to environmental concerns, we can find a few interesting proposals.[3]

Orientedness is the name we could give to what others have simply described as the "virtue of being rightly oriented to nature" (Hursthouse 2007: 163). Hursthouse proposes this virtue as a better philosophical candidate to Paul Taylor's account of "respect for nature" that he developed in his book *Respect for Nature* (1986). Orientedness consists of being rightly disposed to respect and protect not only life, but nature in all its aspects. While Taylor's label of 'respect' for nature gives us a good sense of what the virtue is about, Hursthouse argues that respect as an attitude is more problematic than the corresponding virtue. According to her, "an attitude of respect for nature turns out to involve acquiring a set of dispositions and capacities" (2007: 163) that effectively constitutes a virtue. This virtue manifests itself in various ways, such as refusing to participate in processes that lead to the destruction of forests or the pollution of the oceans, but also "not to slash mindlessly at spiders' webs, to look at

[3] It should not be surprising that the new virtues are substantially less numerous than the old ones, given the fact that, as Hursthouse puts it, "the introduction—or discovery—of a new virtue is a formidable task." (2007: 216)

fossils carefully and try to understand their shape, to be glad rather than sorry that the Grand Canyon is not rimmed with machines dispensing Coca-Cola" (Hursthouse 2007: 167).

Wonder, although properly speaking the name of an emotion, has been taken to be associated with a new, environmental virtue. Hursthouse argues that "being rightly disposed with respect to wonder" is a virtue that consists in "being disposed to feel wonder the right way, towards the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right degree, on the right occasions, in the right manner, and to act accordingly" (Hursthouse 2007: 161). Manifestations of wonder would not only lead people to appreciate nature, but also to be amazed at it and its value. Consequently, they would defend it from destruction and exploitation. More recently, Liezl van Zyl has distinguished between two forms of wonder: surprise-wonder and appreciative-wonder. She argues that only appreciative-wonder is an emotion with a corresponding environmental virtue and that "it plays a role in environmental ethics that is analogous to the role that the capacity for empathetic concern plays in interpersonal ethics" (van Zyl 2021: 89).

Among other new virtues we may count Jamieson's "mindfulness" (2007: 181), namely the virtue that consists of "appreciat[ing] the consequences of our actions that are remote in time and space" (182), and Kawall's "reverence for life" (Kawall 2007).

Section 3 – An Objection to Virtue-Oriented Approaches to Climate Change

We have now reviewed some benefits of a virtue-oriented approach to climate change. We have presented a number of virtues that, if cultivated, will allow us to reshape our relationship with nature and, consequently, tackle climate change. What can possibly go wrong? Several objections have been raised against environmental virtue ethics. It is not my task here to provide a list of all possible concerns.[4] Rather, I want to present one important objection that

[4] For longer lists of important objections see (Kawall 2017), (Cafaro 2015).

relates directly to the focus of this chapter, namely that a virtue-based approach is an ineffective way to deal with the imminent danger of climate change.

Critics such as Joachim Wündisch (2014) have pressed the point that educating the population on new virtues is a slow process, and climate change is imminent. Therefore, the virtues are not a good solution to the problem. With Wündisch's words: "Virtues, values and emotions are not easily changed" and can be modified only "over long periods of time" (2014: 197) which generates "a central complication: timing" (197). Climate change is an extremely urgent concern for humanity. While the holistic approach of virtue ethics may be an important way of reconceiving the relation between human beings and nature to achieve harmony, it is not what we need now. When humanity will have circumvented the catastrophic effects of climate change, a new approach to nature shaped by environmental virtues will be important to construct a harmonic, post-climate change environmentally just society. But for now, the solution must be different.

A similar criticism is developed by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (2012). Bendik-Keymer argues that, within a "bureaucratically organized world" (2012: 273), even a fully virtuous person will end up behaving in such a way that perpetuates the risks of climate change. The point is that our circumstances and our behaviour are constrained and limited by the society we find ourselves in. So, a virtuous person in a large, bureaucratic society will not be able to contribute to tackling climate change if the "economic and political systems are highly ill-adapted to the sorts of challenges posed by the sixth mass extinction, and climate change" (2012: 273). Bendik-Keymer expresses his sympathies to the possibility that virtue has simply gone "out of focus and [needs] to be refocused by a better sense of our context" (2012: 275). He does not deny what most environmental virtue ethicists stress, namely that reconceptualizing old and new virtues can help us foster the relationship of our species to nature *in the long run*. However, the constraint of time remains. Such a reconceptualization,

development and inculcation of the green virtues will likely take a few generations to be effective on a large scale and climate change seems to be happening at a faster pace. Political and legal action, rather than virtue and character, are taken to be the only possible solutions to a very imminent danger.

The main point stressed by Wündisch and Bendik-Keymer, among others, is simple: the virtues are welcome and may improve our relationship with nature in the long run, but we would be overly optimistic if we thought they can be developed and put in place within a large portion of the population before climate change becomes uncontrollable.

One could respond, as Jason Kawall (2017) does, that even if it is true that "we need to address social, political, and economic circumstances" the question of "character and virtue re-emerge" (2017: 669) because only virtuous agents will drive institutional change for the better. But this claim can be challenged: the simple acknowledgement of the catastrophic effect of climate change may be enough to convince people that they need to adopt a different lifestyle, vote for a different party, and the like. One could be selfish and arrogant with respect to the environment and still vote green out of fear that climate change will deprive him of the enjoyments of his old age. It remains unclear, therefore, why the long and difficult cultivation of the virtues, which include emotional atonement, character development, education, etc. should be necessary *to tackle the emergency of climate change*. Environmental regulation can be achieved with green votes, which in turn can be obtained through educational campaigns which are much more feasible and quicker than the process of inculcating virtues.

In one of the very few papers devoted directly to the issue of climate change and virtue ethics, Sophie-Grace Chappell, after arguing in favour of a virtue-based approach, admits that she has no solution to the ineffectiveness challenge. She calls it "the timescale objection". She insists that a philosophical approach to climate change that is based on the virtues "is not

primarily about what-should-we-do-right-now questions" but rather focuses on "*the dispositions that will make us into the kind of people who will give the right answers to* what-should-we-do-right-now questions" (Chappell 2020: 188). However, there seems to be little hope that a sufficient number of people will have these dispositions within the next five or ten years, when climate change really starts to hit. The critics of the virtue-based approach, therefore, argue that for the specific challenge of climate change, effective cooperation must be enforced through national and international regulation.

Conclusion

A brief review of the history and recent developments of environmental virtue ethics has revealed three important points. *First*, although environmental virtue ethics has recently become more popular, not much has been said directly on the problem of climate change. This remains an area for future research. *Second*, the benefits that a virtue ethical approach may have when applied to climate change (such as the way it captures our moral phenomenology and tackles the problem of inconsequentialism) are shared with other virtue-oriented approaches, such as virtue consequentialism. *Third*, most proponents of virtue-oriented approaches, including virtue ethical ones, admit that the cultivation of environmental character traits is not likely to happen quickly. The virtues, therefore, seem not to offer an especially effective way to tackle climate change. Granted, once we have solved this urgent problem, cultivating the green virtues will continue to help us achieve a more harmonic relationship with nature. The virtues have the potential to be of paramount importance in the realization of an environmentally just society. For the imminent floods and droughts, however, virtue may not be enough.

Enrico Galvagni

University of St Andrews

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Index Terms

Benevolence

Carson Rachel

Character

Courage

Gratitude

Hope

Humility

Inconsequentialism

Leopold Aldo

Mindfulness

Patriotism

Respect

Reverence

Temperance

Thoreau Henry David

Utilitarianism

Virtue

Virtue theory

Virtue consequentialism

Wonder

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