



BOOK REVIEWS

Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds. *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. ix, 240 pages.

This is a timely and much-needed collection. In recent years environmental virtue ethics has flourished, establishing itself as a particularly rich, promising approach within environmental ethics. Indeed, environmental virtue ethics has reached a stage in its development where an assessment of what it has accomplished and its potential for further progress is especially appropriate. This volume, by including both important papers in the (admittedly brief) history of environmental virtue ethics, and several new pieces which illustrate the future directions that environmental virtue ethics may take, helps to satisfy this need. *Environmental Virtue Ethics* contains thirteen papers—four of them important reprinted papers, nine of them original to this volume—arranged into four sections, plus a brief introduction by Sandler.

Part one, “Recognizing Environmental Virtue Ethics” contains two previously published selections: “The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Language” by Louke van Wensveen (from her book, *Dirty Virtues*), and “Thoreau, Leopold, Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics” by Philip Cafaro. Both pieces illustrate how virtue language has been surprisingly common—yet overlooked—in much environmental literature (including, but not limited to works explicitly addressing environmental ethics). Thus, there are calls to respect nature, to develop humility, to feel compassion for other sentient beings, and so on, even among authors who do not explicitly place themselves in a virtue-ethical tradition. These pieces demonstrate that environmental virtue ethics has deep roots in environmental discourse—appeals to virtues and exemplary characters are not a mere recent academic fashion.

Part two, “Environmental Virtue Ethics Theory” is the longest section of the book, with five papers devoted to more theoretical issues in developing environmental virtue ethics and its place in environmental ethics more broadly. Thomas Hill Jr.’s important 1983 paper, “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments,” develops a strong case that a lack of a non-instrumental appreciation of nature will typically reflect a lack of important traits that are needed in order to be a virtuous person. In particular, Hill focuses on questions of humility and self-acceptance.

Holmes Rolston, III’s “Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole” charges that environmental virtue ethics cannot provide a complete environmental ethic. In particular, he argues that we must attribute intrinsic value to various features of nature; after all, why should we respect nature unless nature has prior intrinsic value that makes it worthy of



respect? Rolston's piece takes a much more critical stance towards EVE than any of the other papers in this collection, and is a welcome inclusion as such.

Laura Westra's "Virtue Ethics as Foundational for a Global Ethic" is an interesting piece in its own right, though its connection to environmental virtue ethics is somewhat tenuous. Westra focuses instead on Kantian ethics, and its applicability (through rights) to a more cosmopolitan, global ethic. Her engagement with environmental virtue ethics is largely limited to a rather brief discussion where she suggests that human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) will require healthy, flourishing environments (and that Aristotle and Kant would recognize this point).

Bill Shaw's "A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic" is the final reprinted paper in the volume. In it, Shaw argues that fully living in accordance with Leopold's land ethic will require "land virtues," and that focusing on such virtues allows us to avoid extended debates about the possibility of ecosystem rights, and so on. Among his proposed land virtues are respect for biotic communities, prudence, and practical wisdom.

Finally, David Schmidtz and Matt Zwolinski, in "Virtue Ethics and Repugnant Conclusions," apply a strategy similar to that of Hill in considering act-centered (especially consequentialist) moral theories, and what Parfit has referred to as "the repugnant conclusion." Briefly, the problem is that act-centered theories seem to require adding more and more people, even if each individual life would be worse, so long as the lives are worth living (i.e., have even the slightest positive balance of happiness over suffering). Schmidtz and Zwolinski argue that a person who would endorse adding people in this way would possess a problematic character—she would lack a humility that allows one to see human societies as properly playing an appropriately limited role in the biotic community.

In part three, "Environmental Virtues and Vices" there are four papers, discussing specific environmental virtues and vices (Frasz and Cafaro), religious understandings of such virtues (Taliaferro), and a neurobiological account of cardinal virtues (Wensveen).

Intuitively, benevolence would strike many as a potentially important environmental virtue. Geoffrey Frasz, in "Benevolence as an Environmental Virtue," develops and defends this position. Frasz treats benevolence as a family of virtues that are concerned with the well-being of others, and argues that benevolence can—and should—be extended to other living individuals (both sentient and non-sentient), species, and ecosystems (among other entities). Frasz considers a range of objections to his proposals, and provides a generally strong defence in response.

Philip Cafaro's "Gluttony, Greed, and Apathy: An Exploration of Environmental Vice" provides exactly what its title suggests. Cafaro sketches historical accounts and illustrations of these vices, and demonstrates convincingly that they result in tremendous environmental harm. Especially welcome



is the range of contemporary, applied examples to which Cafaro appeals; Cafaro here (and in other work) does much to help combat common suggestions that virtue ethics does not provide adequate action guidance.

Charles Taliaferro, in “Vices and Virtues in Religious Environmental Ethics,” first provides reasons why even secular ethicists would do well to take into account religious approaches to environmental ethics and virtues. He then turns to theistic (in particular, the Abrahamic faiths) and non-theistic (here, Buddhist) approaches to the world, and discusses virtues that may take on prominent roles given such views (gratitude and acting in solidarity with God in theistic traditions, mindfulness [especially of interdependence within the world], and compassion in the Buddhist tradition).

In “Cardinal Environmental Virtues: A Neurobiological Perspective,” Louke van Wensveen proposes that a virtue is cardinal “if its cultivation consists of *conditioning a particular type of neurobiological system that plays a pivotal role in processes of emotional fine-tuning by which agents are enabled to flourish and let flourish under changing circumstances*” (p. 179). She suggests that the traditional four cardinal virtues (temperance, justice, prudence, and fortitude) remain cardinals on her account, but that we need to reinterpret and expand our understanding of these virtues in light of our ecological awareness. Much of her paper is devoted to presenting recent research linking certain brain areas with what might be thought of as virtues (e.g., the frontal lobe system is implicated in justice). This appeal to neurobiology provides an interesting alternative account of the virtues, one that may of significant interest to those working in environmental virtue ethics, and in virtue ethics, more broadly.

Part four, “Applying Environmental Virtue Ethics” consists of two papers (though there are significant discussions of applying environmental virtue ethics in several papers in the other sections of the collection). Peter Wenz, in “Synergistic Environmental Virtues: Consumerism and Human Flourishing,” argues that consumerism is harmful to both the environment and humans (and not just to those in “third world” nations—it has detrimental impacts on those in wealthy nations). Beyond this, Wenz suggests that consumerism leads us towards traditional vices (such as gluttony, sloth, and envy), while traditional virtues (such as frugality, temperance, and generosity) oppose consumerism. As such the traditional virtues and environmentalism are mutually reinforcing.

Finally, in his “A Virtue Ethics Perspective on Genetically Modified Crops,” Ronald Sandler suggests that in order to morally assess any particular biotechnology, we need to take into account whether the technology “compromises the capacity of the natural environment to produce the goods essential to the development and maintenance of virtue,” and whether it “is contrary to any of the virtues applicable to human interactions with the natural environment” (p. 220). Sandler argues that most current genetically modified crops fail to meet the first “external goods” criterion (as they continue monoculture and extensive agrochemical use, among other worries); still, there are exceptions,



including golden rice. With respect to the second criterion, Sandler believes that while the use of GMOs would *often* reflect an arrogance, or lack of humility (insofar as we attempt to address agricultural problems through manipulating nature), it need not always be the case.

Sandler and Cafaro have put together a strong, wide-ranging collection with selections that well reflect the depth and range of recent work in environmental virtue ethics. This work addresses questions of metaethics, moral psychology, and normative ethics, in addition to important, specific applied issues (and again demonstrates that environmental ethics is not “merely” an applied ethics). Of course, given this tremendous breadth, there are not always strong immediate connections between the papers. There are, as with any collection of this kind, potential questions about which papers have been included and which omitted (e.g., Geoffrey Frasz’s “Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 16 [1994]: 259–74, would have been an excellent inclusion). But these latter are both minor qualms.

In addition to being a valuable resource for researchers, *Environmental Virtue Ethics* would serve as an effective supplement in both undergraduate and graduate-level courses for those who wish to incorporate work from within the environmental virtue ethics tradition. It might be best used throughout a course to explore environmental virtue ethics perspectives on various issues, rather having a section of the course devoted exclusively to the volume itself. For example, Sandler provides a plausible environmental virtue ethics perspective on genetically modified crops; Schmidtz and Zwolinski’s chapter would be relevant to issues of population growth and consumption (as would chapters by Wenz and Cafaro); Cafaro and Shaw provide illuminating perspectives on Leopold, and so on.

With this collection, Sandler and Cafaro succeed in fulfilling their stated desire to “provide an impetus and orientation” (p. 12) for further work on central issues in environmental virtue ethics. We can expect much future work in environmental virtue ethics to develop out of, and in response to the papers found in this volume.

Jason Kawall*

*Department of Philosophy and Religion, Environmental Studies, Colgate University, 13 Oak Dr., Hamilton, NY 13346; email: jkawall@mail.colgate.edu