Virtue and the Good Life in an Age of Environmental Crisis

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Thesis Abstract

If the basic question of ethics is ‘How should I live?’, then any remotely reflective answer must consider what it is to be a human being in an age defined by human-induced environmental problems. This thesis is an exploration of the nature of good environmental character, and its relation to good environmental action in both theory and practice. As such, it is a contribution to one prominent strand of modern moral philosophy usually called ‘virtue ethics’, and to the sub-field of environmental ethics. However, my approach to environmental ethics faces a number of important challenges. Opponents might say that there is an objectionable anthropocentrism involved in an ethic of human character. Others might question the relationship between the human-centred values associated with some traits of character, and other nature-centred environmental values. In Part I, I respond to a range of such issues, including the nature of environmental ethics; the adequacy of an environmental ethic based primarily on human character traits; the apparent tension between environmentally good actions and human wellbeing; and the nature and justification of environmental values. However, Part I does not deal with any of the substantive issues that we now face. In Part II, I bring the reflective thinking associated with virtue ethics to bear onto a set of pressing threats to human wellbeing and environmental sustainability, most notably climate change. The topics covered here include modern consumer lifestyles and conceptions of the good life; the threat of climate skepticism and other kinds of irrationality to individual and collective wellbeing; the threat of self-deception in response to climate change; and the nature of individual and collective responsibility for climate change. In doing so, I have tried to explore some of the central theoretical and practical obstacles to living better as human beings.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface,

ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

iii. the thesis is fewer than 100 000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed,
Acknowledgements

No work in philosophy, or in any other discipline, is carried out entirely alone. As a reflective discussion of life, a philosopher’s meditations are inevitably influenced by more conversations, events, and people than he can call to mind at any one time.

First of all, I wish to thank all of those who have made it possible for me to pursue this path: my partner Daniela, whose support, patience, and intellect have accompanied me for as long as I can remember; and my family as a whole, which has supported me throughout the rigours of postgraduate study.

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I wish to thank Rosalind Hursthouse for supervising me during a semester spent at the University of Auckland. Her influence on my thinking is perhaps evidenced by the sheer number of citations I have made to her work.

I also wish to thank all of the friends and colleagues at the University of Melbourne who have read and discussed my work. I have found that the last thing one must do when in the grip of a philosophical problem is to keep it to oneself. Of course, any remaining errors are my own.

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Finally, given the nature of the world and the pervasiveness of luck in human life, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to pursue a doctorate in philosophy.
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Introduction

If the basic question of ethics is ‘How should I live?’, what does it mean to ask this question now? While it is true that anyone who has ever asked this question did so at a particular time, we now live in a world increasingly defined by our species’ collective impact on the planet. Some scholars, notably (but not only) ecologists and geologists, mark this change by claiming that we have moved into a new geological epoch, the ‘Anthropocene’, which is defined by the unprecedented influence that our species now exerts over the planet. This term, which is usually attributed to the Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen and the ecologist Eugene Stoermer, reflects a difference in kind between the worlds in which other people might have asked this question, and the world as we find it today.1 For the central point about the Anthropocene is that human behaviour is changing the functioning of the natural world at a scale that was previously unimaginable.

At the dawn of the new millennium, Crutzen and Stoermer warned that rapid human industrialisation over the past three centuries had transformed almost half of the total surface area of the earth.2 Human agriculture now fixes more nitrogen into ecosystems than the combined total of all terrestrial ecosystems. Human beings are already using more than half the accessible drinking water on the planet. Human behaviour has raised the species extinction rate thousands of times above natural averages, to levels not seen since the last Ice Age. Toxic synthetic substances can now be found in every part of the earth. Experts also believe that the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels, if left unchecked, will eventually make large sections of the earth uninhabitable to human beings. When combined with the extraordinary tenfold explosion in the human population over that period, and with the current population trajectory of nine billion by the middle of this century, these problems are clearly of the first importance.

One would think that they would also be of the first importance in the philosophical discipline of ethics. However, the potentially profound implications of the Anthropocene have been little considered by most philosophers. In one of the few discussions of this point, Sarah Krakoff writes: “We have, I believe, not yet grappled with where we are as a species in relationship with the rest of the natural world. Despite having entered the Anthropocene, we have not embarked on a widespread project of reconsidering what this might mean in terms of our obligations to other species, future generations, or even the many human beings who are on the short end of our effects on natural systems”3. But the Anthropocene should encourage more than simply a revised understanding of obligation.4 If the basic question of ethics is indeed ‘How should I live?’, then part of any remotely reflective answer should include what it is to be a human being.

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1 Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "Have We Entered the "Anthropocene"?," IGBP Global Change 2000.
2 Most of these claims are summarised in ibid. For more recent figures, see WWF/ZSL/GFN, Living Planet Report 2012 (London).
4 As Bernard Williams argued, narrowing the focus of ethics to the concept of obligation already presupposes many of the assumptions of modern moral philosophy. I agree with Williams that in many respects we would be better off without these assumptions. See his Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London: Fontana, 1985).
in an age defined by human-induced environmental problems. Fundamentally, this concern motivates and unifies the present work.

However, no starting-point in philosophy is likely to be uncontroversial. In adopting this starting-point, some will object that I have ignored more compelling alternatives. In particular, some will complain that I have ignored the apparently more important question, 'What should I do?'. Utilitarians, and those inspired by the moral philosophy of Kant, typically prefer this question, which aims at uncovering the particular actions that one ought to perform in response to the moral problems one faces. The question about how to live, if this is indeed regarded as an ethical question, is thought to be secondary in importance to the question of how one should act. Instead, I consider the reverse to be true: that is, the account of what one ought to do will depend on a prior account of how one should live, being, as it were, a particular application of a more general way of thinking. But, in the absence of good knock-down arguments about which starting-point to adopt, I can only hope to support my view indirectly, by showing what is involved in adopting it. In particular, in what follows I aim to show that a particular way of thinking about how we should live, here and now, is reflectively compelling. Compelling for whom? Well, hopefully not only for those with some training in philosophy. I follow Aristotle in thinking that ethical philosophy exists in a dialectical relationship with the beliefs, norms, concerns, and exigencies of actual human beings. Ideally, then, ethical philosophy can aim to contribute to these ordinary ways of going on in the world, as well as to philosophical understanding of the concepts involved.

The present work is a contribution to one prominent strand of modern moral philosophy, usually dubbed 'virtue ethics'. What is distinctive about this approach is that one seeks to address both the question of how one ought to live and the question of what one ought to do in terms of virtue concepts such as justice, generosity, compassion, and the like. Despite the anachronism of the word 'virtue' in modern language, these normative concepts clearly play a vital role in ordinary ethical discourse and practice. For instance, we label some action as cruel as a way of characterising it as bad. Moreover, we label a person as cruel as a way of characterising him as bad. In the second case, we criticise not only what someone has done, but the underlying disposition that we believe him to possess. These concepts, as dispositions of people, are basic to virtue theory. Rather than talking about the virtues in terms of universal moral principles or rules, as both utilitarianism and Kantianism recommend, virtue ethics focuses primarily on these qualities of good and bad character. In what follows, I explore the nature of good environmental character, and its relation to good environmental action, in both theory and practice. I argue that the recognition of environmental value, and the cultivation of good environmental character, should now be seen as a part of mainstream virtue theory. Moreover, I argue that the kind of reflective thinking associated with virtue ethics has much to offer to the problems raised by the Anthropocene.

The concerns I address in this work are also a direct contribution to the sub-field of environmental ethics. Since its inception, environmental ethics has focused on the relationship between human beings and nature, and the importance of values in shaping this relationship. Inspired by the popular environmental movement, environmental ethics has aimed at problematising some of the central values and practices of modern societies. The main thrust of early environmental ethics is thus the critique of 'anthropocentrism', or human-centeredness, a kind of value orientation that allegedly puts human interests first and the environment last, and which relies on a sharp separation of the human from nature. Until recently, virtue ethics has
been relatively unappreciated within environmental ethics. And it is easy to see why: if anthropocentrism is to blame for the environmental crisis, then an ethical philosophy which takes human character to be of primary importance would seem to be of little interest. However, the nature of environmental problems actually seems to support taking a virtue ethics approach. This is because environmental problems are typically collective problems that individuals cannot solve alone. Although we might all contribute to them, each of our contributions is inconsequentially small. And this should encourage analysis of environmental problems in terms of character traits, rather than in terms of individual actions. Indeed, Dale Jamieson has even claimed that an ethic of good environmental character should be adopted by utilitarians, because it allows us to decouple the motivation to act well from its expected outcome. The benefit of this should be clear: if individual action is inconsequential, then it would seem hard to motivate good action; but if good action is the result of an underlying disposition that finds intrinsic motivation in acting well, then the problem seems to disappear.

However, environmental virtue ethics still faces a number of important challenges. Opponents might say that there is nonetheless an objectionable anthropocentrism involved in an ethic of human character. Others might question the relationship between the human-centred values associated with some traits of character, and the environmental values that, it is alleged, have escaped the consideration of modern moral philosophers. These challenges raise important questions about the relationship between virtue, human good, and the environment, and call into question the adequacy of virtue ethics in this domain.

In Part I of this thesis, I try to address the most serious of these challenges. In Chapter 1, ‘Environmental Virtue: A Fresh Start’, I explore an ethical belief that has become increasingly commonplace: that we should try to live ‘greener’, more sustainable lives. This belief is obviously part of an answer to our opening question. But, because this is a claim about the sorts of people we should try to become, it remains open to anyone to ask why he or she should try to become a person like that. One influential view maintains that we should aim to become environmentally virtuous because this would respect important environmental values, and would enable us to live well as human beings. Attractive as this answer appears, I argue that it is unstable, because these goals are held to be essentially separable from one another. Moreover, I argue that this problem is the result of certain presuppositions about the nature of value which we need not accept. Instead, I suggest that we think about how we should live on this planet by asking how we should live as human beings.

In Chapter 2, ‘Environmental Virtue and Human Good’, I explore another belief common amongst both philosophers and environmentalists, that there is a tension between trying to help the environment and trying to live a happy, fulfilling life. That is, it is thought that the aim of living an environmentally sensitive life can come apart from the aim of living a good life. This difficulty is supposed to show that eudaimonist philosophies, which focus on the concept of human flourishing or wellbeing, have little to offer to environmental ethics. However, I argue that there is no obvious tension between the aim of trying to live well, and the aim of trying to live sustainably. Moreover, I claim that when we reflect on what it is for a human being to live well, there are strong reasons to think that environmental considerations will be important features of any compelling answer we might give.

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In Chapter 3, 'Relativism, Ambiguity, and the Environmental Virtues: an Exploration of Care for Nature', I take up the question of what environmental virtues there might be, and how we can tell. Many environmental writers and philosophers have recommended lists of environmental virtues, enriching environmental ethics by new virtue terms, such as ecological sensitivity or kinship with nature, or with new applications of older terms such as benevolence or care. But how do we know which of these are genuine virtues? Although this question is important for any environmental philosopher, it is difficult to answer. First, we think of ‘nature’ in a variety of ways, each of which presupposes ethical beliefs about the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world. Second, our environmental discourse is not as familiar or fixed as it seems to be with other virtue concepts. I respond to both problems by considering the life of someone widely considered to be an environmental exemplar, US nature writer and conservationist Rachel Carson. I claim that Carson’s example shows us what it means to care for nature, and I suggest that care is one virtue that we have reason to recognise. A serious objection to this account is that our admiration of people like Carson seems to be culturally specific, because it depends on particular cultural beliefs and values which might be in conflict with those of other cultures. But I argue that this threat need not shake our reflective confidence in appraisals of admirable people, or in our practice of recognising some ways of thinking about nature as excellent rather than others.

In the light of this argument, in Chapter 4, 'Reconsidering Environmental Values', I return to the historically vexed issues raised by environmental value theory. These discussions have often been framed as debates between an environmentalist, who believes that aspects of nature are intrinsically valuable, and a skeptic who does not. Many environmental philosophers mistakenly thought that existing theories of value could not capture the nature of this dispute because they could not account for environmental values. However, I argue that this critique neither justifies nor requires the abandonment of traditional value theory. Second, philosophers mistakenly believed that environmental values (and values in general) were beyond the reach of rational discourse and persuasion. As a result, the sort of disagreement that environmental philosophers wanted to address was misconceived as a battle between opposing worldviews, adoption of which did not rely upon an exchange of reasons, but upon a kind of non-rational commitment. In this chapter, I suggest that an expanded conception of human value can do justice to attributions of environmental value without making value discourse dependent upon the irrational adoption of a worldview.

These four chapters address some of the conceptual questions arising from reflecting about ethics in the Anthropocene. Although these discussions primarily concern issues in modern virtue ethics, and in environmental ethics, there should be much here for those with different theoretical assumptions. However, Part I does not deal with any of the substantive issues that we now face. If virtue ethics provides an illuminating answer to the question of how we should live, then it is also worth considering the application of this tradition to some of the problems we face. In Part II, I explore a set of pressing threats to human wellbeing and environmental sustainability. Although I sometimes refer back to Part I, I have tried not to appeal to the conception of virtue ethics defended there. In doing so, my aim was to make these discussions compelling on their own terms, and acceptable to those with different philosophical views. At the same time, the insights and arguments found in Part II are not only consistent with, but informed by what I say in Part I.
In Chapter 5, ‘Consumer Lifestyles, Sustainability, and the Good Life’, I explore a large body of research suggesting that consumer lifestyles are both bad for the planet and bad for us. Growth in consumption is a major cause of ecological problems, and constitutes a large threat to current and future generations. Social psychologists have also highlighted a number of ways in which consumerism undermines the quality of people’s lives. But at the level of the individual, consumer lifestyles are supported by unreflective, and misguided ideas about happiness and the good life. Instead, I explore two ‘philosophies of habit’, philosophical pragmatism and virtue ethics, which each provide distinctive accounts of how reflection on our habits can improve our lives. Of these, I argue that virtue ethics has the most to contribute to the problems raised by mass consumption: as a form of philosophical ‘therapy’, reflection on the place of habits in our lives encourages us to change any problematic beliefs and behaviours we may have, as we strive to live better lives.

The next two chapters explore some common, yet ethically problematic responses to information about climate change. In Chapter 6, ‘What’s Wrong with Climate Skeptics? Epistemic Irrationality and the Value of Truth’, I discuss the phenomenon of climate skepticism. Although we might think that there is something wrong with climate skepticism, recent research by social psychologists suggests that, like skeptics, most of us form beliefs that fit with our ideological commitments. Indeed, one leading theory claims that ordinary people are unable to interpret specialised information without bias. I suggest that if this were correct, then all of our true beliefs about scientific matters would be accidentally true. Moreover, I argue that it is not merely that skeptics are improperly biased, but that skeptics ignore the epistemic norms which they ordinarily rely upon. For implicit in our ordinary practices of truth-seeking and truth-telling are ethical judgements about the value of truth. This point allows us to see more clearly what is wrong with climate skepticism, along with other instances of irrational epistemic behaviour. In the final section, I discuss the practical demands of dealing with people like climate skeptics in the short term, where reaching some kind of political consensus is important. But this also raises questions about the adequacy of modern education to equip people with the epistemic skills that modern political participation requires.

In Chapter 7, ‘Self-Deception, Illusion, and Climate Change’, I discuss an apparent paradox: while most people know that the consequences of a warmer world are likely to be dire, they do almost nothing to prevent it. I claim that this tension is resolved through self-deception: by distancing ourselves from what we know about climate change, we undermine our motivation to respond. However, the result of this is a kind of ignorance about ourselves, where we continue to believe that we are the sorts of people who act on what we believe to be right, even in the face of contradictory evidence. Indeed, this suggests that self-deception is primarily an existential condition of delusion or ignorance about the self. Second, I claim that while fostering illusions about ourselves can be benign, it can be seriously problematic when we selectively ignore our ethical beliefs. I suggest that this is just what is occurring in response to climate change: we fail to respond to this threat, but we do not recognise what this response reveals about us as people. I argue that by considering how future generations will judge us, we can see how this self-deception risks severely tarnishing evaluations of our lives.

Finally, in ‘Responsibility for Climate Change: collectively responsible but not to blame?’, I take up an issue that many philosophers have struggled with, namely whether anyone is morally responsible for climate change. For, whether we focus on individuals or collectives, it seems that there are no actions which could be attributed to individuals, nor any collective...
agents that could be responsible for them. As the unintentional consequence of entire ways of living, climate change seems to be a problem that no-one is responsible for. However, I argue that these difficulties arise because philosophers have been looking at climate change through the wrong theoretical lens: the lens of Kantian moral agency. Instead, I defend a novel approach to the problem, grounded in Iris Young’s theory of responsibility for structural injustice. I claim that this approach provides a far better account of why we share a collective responsibility for climate change, and does not rely upon the usual, problematic assumptions about moral agency. Thinking about responsibility for climate change in this way culminates in a renewed focus on nation-states, and on the responsibility that individuals bear as members of political communities. In doing so, I have tried to explore some of the central theoretical and practical obstacles to living better human lives.

References

Part I
Environmental Virtue: A Fresh Start

Introduction

We currently live in an age of environmental crisis. In response, many environmentalists have plausibly suggested that we should try to live ‘greener’, more sustainable lives. These appeals encourage a change both in our behaviour and in our characters: for instance, we are recommended to be benevolent, caring, or respectful towards nature. While one does not need to be a philosopher to make such claims, it remains open to anyone to ask why he should try to live like that, or why he should try to become someone like that. According to one influential view, we should aim to become environmentally virtuous because this would respect important environmental values, and would enable us to live well as human beings. However, I argue that this view is internally unstable, because these goals are held to be essentially separable from one another. Moreover, I argue that this problem is the result of presuppositions about the nature of value, and the supposed clash between human and environmental interests, which we have good reasons to reject. Instead, I suggest that we begin thinking about how we should live on this planet by asking how we should live as human beings.

I.

We currently live in an age of environmental crisis. Human activity has created a series of severe biodiversity challenges that threaten much of life on Earth, including us. Although climate change is the most prominent of these challenges, others include ocean acidification, the destruction or pollution of wild ecosystems, and the mass extinctions of species at rates unmatched since the last Ice Age. Moreover, everyone now living is exposed to thousands of synthetic pollutants in our environment, many of which accumulate in our bodies over time even after exposure to small concentrations.¹ In the face of these problems, it is not difficult to believe that drastic changes to our ways of living may be necessary. Many have claimed that we need to encourage radically different attitudes and ways of living if we are to change how we use and interact with nature. In fact, environmentalist literature is replete with exhortations to live more sustainable, ‘greener’ lives. This literature generally recommends that we aim to possess environmentally sensitive traits of character, traits such as respect for nature, benevolence, mindfulness, moderation, or simplicity. By making these sorts of qualities central to the aim of living sustainably, these appeals are clearly framed in a distinct moral language: the language of virtue. For what is being recommended is not only a change in our behaviour, but a change in ourselves, and in how we think about our place in the world. Indeed, in her thorough review of this literature, Louke van Wensveen writes: "I have yet to come across a

¹ This is referred to as the chemical ‘body burden’. While the harmful effects of many of these synthetic chemicals are known, many more are seriously understudied. For an review of biomonitoring of the ‘body burden’ by the US Environmental Protection Agency, see J. W. Thornton, M. McCally, and J. Houlihan, “Biomonitoring of Industrial Pollutants: Health and Policy Implications of the Chemical Body Burden,” Public Health Rep 117, no. 4 (2002). Available at: http://www.epa.gov/ncer/cra/webinars/2012/thornton-resources-phr.pdf.
piece of ecologically sensitive philosophy, theology, or ethics that does not in some way incorporate virtue language”.2

Although one does not need to be a philosopher to use this language, one does need to engage in philosophical argument when one wishes to justify these recommendations. For, in response to another’s exhortations, it remains open to anyone to ask why he should try to live like that, or why he should try to become someone like that. In ancient philosophy, there was one general answer to this question, namely that we should try to become virtuous because doing so would make us into the best version of ourselves: we would flourish, or would be fully happy by becoming that sort of person.3 In the next chapter, I will defend a reinterpretation of this thesis applied to environmental ethics. However, for a variety of reasons, such a view has been unpopular among philosophers working on environmental issues. Before discussing my own view, then, we should explore rival answers to our question, along with some common reservations against thinking about environmental issues in terms of living well. In this chapter, I concentrate on Ronald Sandler’s influential view on environmental virtue and the ethically good life. However, I criticise Sandler for being unable to fully answer the question of why anyone should try to become environmentally virtuous. I then explore some of the further philosophical reasons that I believe to explain the general opposition to thinking about environmental issues in terms of living well, which include presuppositions about environmental value, and about moral value claims more generally. Finally, I explore the prospects of an enlightened anthropocentrism in environmental ethics.

II.

In Character and Environment, Ronald Sandler argues that we should become environmentally virtuous because doing so shows respect for natural values. Sandler outlines a set of dispositions he calls ‘virtues of respect for nature’, which include: care and compassion for nonhuman nature, ecological sensitivity, nonmaleficence, and ecological justice. Indeed, Sandler claims that if his arguments in support of these virtues are successful, they will entail recognition of “the flourishing of living things as an end for all human moral agents”.4

While some philosophers have tried to argue that we should become environmentally virtuous because doing so would contribute to our living well,5 Sandler claims that any adequate

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3 For discussion of the centrality of this answer in ancient philosophy, and analysis of the differences among the various schools, see Julia Annas, The Morality of Happiness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
justification must not appeal to eudaimonia (human happiness or wellbeing). Instead, Sandler gives the following account of what makes a trait of character a virtue:

“A human being is ethically good (i.e. virtuous) insofar as she is well fitted with respect to her (i) emotions, (ii) desires, and (iii) actions (from reason and inclination); whether she is thus well fitted is determined by whether these aspects well serve (1) her survival, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) her characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, (4) the good functioning of her social group, (5) her autonomy, (6) the accumulation of knowledge, (7) a meaningful life, and (8) the realisation of any noneudaimonistic ends (grounded in noneudaimonistic goods and values) – in the way characteristic of human beings (i.e., in a way that can rightly be seen as good).”

While none of these ends is individually necessary for a character trait to be a virtue, end (8) is distinctive because it alone does not contribute to human flourishing. Furthermore, only end (8) appears to allow Sandler to accommodate “nonanthropocentric value” claims within his theory. Two questions emerge here. First, we need to know what ‘noneudaimonistic’ ends actually are, and second we need to know what it is about them, and about ourselves, which makes it the case that virtuous people will rightly see them as good.

A noneudaimonistic end seems to be any end that does not pertain in some way to human flourishing or happiness. Sandler says that end (8) is meant to accommodate the nonanthropocentric value claim that each individual organism that is “goal-directed” has a good of its own. This claim comes originally from Paul Taylor’s Respect for Nature, where Taylor claims that all living things that are “teleological centers of life” have goods of their own. As this claim is understood by both Taylor and Sandler, what it is for something to have a good of its own is just for it to be an entity that pursues its biologically determined ends. For instance, an apple tree sends its roots down to find water and other minerals in the nearby soil, or stretches its leaves outward to maximise its photosynthesis of light energy into chemical energy. Thus, Sandler adds that something has a good of its own so long as it is “goal- or end-directed”, and that something’s being goal-directed provides the basis for “claims about its being harmed or benefitted”.

While this claim is plausible, Sandler draws the rather startling conclusion that if goal-directedness is taken to be the relevant standard for making claims about the interests of living things, it follows that there can be no way to establish the superiority of one species’ good over that of another without begging the question. This point is aimed against those who believe that one species (namely, human beings) is superior to all others by virtue of our possession of some unique capacity (e.g., rationality, sentience). But Sandler argues that if we adopt the

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6 The Greek term eudaimonia is notoriously difficult to translate into English, for it does not fully correspond to our concept of ‘happiness’, nor really ‘wellbeing’.
7 Ronald L. Sandler, Character and Environment : A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 28. This account consciously echoes that given by Rosalind Hursthouse in her On Virtue Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). I will discuss the implications of Sandler’s adoption of Hursthouse’s view in the following section.
8 Character and Environment : A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics, 77.
10 Sandler, Character and Environment : A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics, 67.
11 Ibid., 77.
12 Ibid., 67-69.
perspective of scientific naturalism, there cannot be any superiority among such capacities, since these are all "just a contingent outcome of evolution". Thus, Sandler claims that where capacities are just the result of evolution, there is "no neutral standpoint" from which to judge the superiority of one set of capacities over another. Moreover, Sandler adds that if a new species evolved with more advanced cognitive capacities than our own, we would not thereby consider its members to be of more worth than us.

However, it is not clear why a commitment to scientific naturalism requires one to adopt a neutral view on different capacities. This appeal to a purely descriptive and agent-independent view of the world and of ourselves would not obviously tell us anything about ethics or about values. As John McDowell has argued, the idea of a 'neutral standpoint' is itself already constructed out of a particular, evaluative perspective which is being tacitly presupposed whenever we appeal to it. As McDowell puts it, "it is one thing to recognize that the impersonal stance of scientific investigation is a methodological necessity for the achievement of a valuable mode of understanding reality; it is quite another thing to take the dawning grasp of this, in the modern era, for a metaphysical insight into the notion of objectivity as such".

This illusion about moral objectivity also seems to mask a further problem. For, granted that we can speak about the goods of living things in a purely naturalistic sense, it simply does not follow that we have any reason to promote or respect these goods. As John O'Neill pointed out, merely establishing that something has a good of its own is not yet to make any normative claim about it from a human point of view. As O'Neill says, establishing that "Y is good for X does not entail that Y should be realised unless we have a prior reason for believing that X is the sort of thing whose good ought to be promoted".

In Taylor's theory, the goods of living things are supposed to be normative because a sufficiently rational person will have adopted the "biocentric outlook". This normative perspective already requires agents to recognise that everything with a good of its own is "inherently worthy". According to Taylor, recognition of this value requires that "all moral agents have a prima facie duty to promote or preserve the entity's good as an end in itself and for the sake of the entity whose good it is". But, as Victoria Davion pointed out, there are obvious practical absurdities that would follow from even a defeasible duty of this kind. Moreover, this move merely pushes

13 Ibid., 69.
14 Ibid., 68.
16 Ibid., 164.
18 Ibid.
19 Taylor, Respect for Nature : A Theory of Environmental Ethics, 73-75. According to Taylor, inherent worth is a kind of value that is strictly independent of the perspective of any human evaluator, and also strictly independent of any consideration of its usefulness in promoting some other valued end.
20 Ibid., 75. Taylor acknowledges that the biocentric outlook is intended to complement the Kantian ultimate moral attitude, 'respect for persons'.
the original problem further back, so that the question now becomes why anyone should accept the biocentric outlook, a question that Taylor does not adequately respond to.\footnote{Taylor merely claims that all rational persons, with “a developed capacity for reality awareness”, will accept the biocentric outlook, which already entails that goal-directedness is the basis for a claim to moral standing in living things.}

Sandler attempts to avoid this problem by showing the plausibility of his picture as a description of how environmentally virtuous people do in fact behave. For it is certainly true that an enduring concern for nature, and perhaps for living things in particular, seems to be distinctive of some of our most striking examples of environmentally virtuous people.\footnote{I will discuss how we think about environmentally virtuous people more fully in the next two chapters.} However, this does not justify the claim that the property of goal-directedness in living things is the distinctive ground of environmental virtue. For this is quite different from simply saying that environmentally virtuous people take the goods of living things seriously.

Indeed, it is not clear what general reason there could be for thinking that the goods of other living things exercise this sort of normative grip upon us. According to Sandler, “[t]he facts about us and our way of going about the world ‘translate’ natural values and worth into practical norms for us”.\footnote{Sandler, \textit{Character and Environment : A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics}, 113.} But although this is uncontroversial as a general claim about how our dispositions enable us to attribute value, this response does not show why the fact of goal-directedness itself must be ‘translated’ as a value in the practical reasoning of the virtuous person. What we still need, then, is an account of what it is about these goods, and about ourselves as evaluators, which shows why they should be recognised as normative.

\section*{III.}

As we saw, Sandler claimed that environmentally virtuous people will be disposed to promote or respect noneudaimonistic ends in a way that can rightly be seen as good. Given the difficulties outlined above, one might suppose that this criterion of rational endorsability explains why the goods of living things ought to matter to us: that is, an environmentally virtuous person would rightly see their promotion as a good thing. Moreover, as we saw, Sandler also believes that this claim entails recognition of “the flourishing of living things as an end for all human moral agents”. However, as I will now argue, Sandler’s attempt to ground environmental values in the rational endorsement of the virtuous person flounders because it relies upon an unstable conception of practical rationality.

Sandler’s apparently universal claim about practical reasoning relies upon Rosalind Hursthouse’s argument that part of what is characteristic about human beings is our ability to choose and act on reasons that we can rationally endorse. According to Hursthouse, being ethically good \textit{qua} human being is determined by how well an agent is disposed to promote the ends that are peculiar to human beings as a species. This ‘life-form’ perspective, which equates the ethical goodness of species with the naturalistic ends characteristic to them, is also associated with the ‘natural goodness’ view of Philippa Foot.\footnote{Philippa Foot, \textit{Natural Goodness} (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001). The idea of ‘good’ as an attributive adjective belongs originally to Peter Geach’s “Good and Evil,” \textit{Analysis} 17, no. 2 (1956).} The central idea of the natural goodness view is that whenever we say that \textit{x} is good, we mean that \textit{x} is a good \textit{x}, that is, a good member of its kind. According to this view, facts about particular species are significant in determining whether an individual is a good member of its species. Thus, Foot argues that there
is something defective about a free riding wolf, who “eats but does not take part in the hunt”, just as there is something wrong with “a member of the species of dancing bees who finds a source of nectar but does not let other bees know where it is”.26 Free riding individuals are defective as members of their species because their respective species are characteristically social; a free riding wolf would be defective because wolves are social animals that characteristically engage in cooperative, and at times altruistic behaviour for the good of the pack. Given this, participation in the hunt is obviously an important aspect of being a good wolf.

On the natural goodness view, the basis of moral evaluation of individuals is similar in all cases in that it must be attentive to the relevant characteristics of the species to which they belong. According to Foot, “natural goodness...is attributable only to living things themselves and to their parts, characteristics, and operations, [and] is intrinsic or ‘autonomous’ goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the ‘life form’ of its species”.27 Both Foot and Hursthouse maintain that evaluating living beings in this way brings one to a standard of evaluation based around the life-form of particular species. As Foot puts it,

“[n]obody would, I think, take it as other than a plain matter of fact that there is something wrong with the hearing of a gull that cannot distinguish the cry of its own chick, as with the sight of an owl that cannot see in the dark. Similarly, it is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life-form of our own species”.28

In these naturalistic evaluations of other creatures, the use of the predicate ‘good’ is almost indistinguishable from that of ‘healthy’. However, when we come to evaluate good human beings, we can separate those aspects that fall under purely physical evaluations of goodness, such as good sight or hearing, from what we might consider to be purely ethical evaluations of good human beings. After we have separated those aspects of ourselves that are merely physical, we are left with our actions, emotions, and desires, as well as our distinctive human rationality, which adds in particular the concept of our being able to act for a good reason. It is the combination of these features which allows us to evaluate human beings as ethically good or bad. And Hursthouse claims that this is “a list of just those aspects of us that manifest our ethical character, for well or ill”.29

According to Hursthouse, then, one is good qua human being when one is “as ordinarily well fitted as a human being can be... to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way”.30 Unlike other creatures, we are capable of reflecting on the goodness of our reasons, and so we cannot simply read off human potentialities from descriptions of how we in fact behave. As Hursthouse puts it, “[o]ur characteristic way of going on... is a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do”.31 It is this notion

27 Natural Goodness, 26-27.
28 "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?,” 14.
29 Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 207.
30 Ibid., 208.
31 Ibid., 222. However, acting from reason is not to be contrasted with acting from emotion. As Hursthouse (p. 208) says, “[n]otwithstanding the enormous importance of our actions from reason, our emotions are also morally significant, and being well disposed with respect to them involves being well disposed with respect to the occasional impulsive actions from inclination, and the emotional reactions which are not merely physical, to which they give rise".
of rational endorsability that is central to Sandler’s theory of environmental virtue. For Sandler claims that the promotion of the goods of living things should be rightly seen as good, and that this is a constitutive part of what makes one ethically good qua human being.

However, unlike others who are attracted to the natural goodness view in ethics, Sandler claims that the notion of rational endorsability is derived not from our form of life, but from the nature of practical reason itself. Sandler writes:

“in my account of what makes a character trait a virtue, endorsability (which involves practical rationality) modifies the ends against which character traits are evaluated - i.e. human goodness is established. Therefore, on my view, human goodness (and thereby goodness of choice) is derived in part from practical rationality, which is just the reverse of the relationship Foot proposes”.

But this move introduces a serious problem of its own. As Allen Thompson has argued, Sandler’s position now seems to have helped itself to an “unexplained conception of good reasoning”, which is “tacked-on to do most of the heavy lifting”. However, as Thompson points out, in Foot’s position goodness of choice is prior to practical rationality. And it is easy to see why Foot does this, for as Thompson notes, her view aims to “establish criteria for judgements of sound practical reasoning on the basis of a moral evaluation of the human rational will, which in turn depend on teleological propositions about our natural form of life”. In contrast, Sandler’s appeal to an undisclosed independent standard of rational endorsability begs the question that there is such a standard in the first place. At the very least, he is left with the burden of defending a view of good practical reasoning that does not appeal to our form of life in order to make sense of something’s being rightly seen as good by a virtuous person. Absent such an account, we are apparently left with no justification for the claim that environmentally virtuous people will promote or respect the goods of all living things.

We started with the question of how to justify the ethical prescriptions of many environmentalists to live more ecologically sensitive lives. The discussion so far has not given us any reason to cast doubt on these prescriptions, but it has revealed the problems with one of the most influential attempts to do so. I will discuss these issues further in the next two chapters. However, in what remains of this chapter I want to distance myself from a set of philosophical assumptions or doctrines that have loomed large in environmental philosophy thus far, but

32 Sandler argues that his position maintains the crucial normative structure of the natural goodness approach, according to which “some aspect of the individual is evaluated according to its role/conduciveness with respect to certain ends”. See McShane, Thompson, and Sandler, "Virtue and Respect for Nature: Ronald Sandler's Character and Environment," 230-31.
33 Ibid., 220.
34 Indeed, Foot writes: “there is no criterion for practical rationality that is not derived from that of goodness of the will”. Foot, Natural Goodness, 11.
36 Sandler’s response is to claim that the ends which practical rationality can set for human beings are derived via the methodology of wide reflective equilibrium. See McShane, Thompson, and Sandler, "Virtue and Respect for Nature: Ronald Sandler's Character and Environment", 228.
which in my view present a serious obstacle to answering our opening question in an adequate manner. In this way, we can properly consider the ethical implications of living in an age of environmental crisis, without our thinking being distorted from the outset by some of the popular but unhelpful assumptions of environmental philosophy.

IV.

A common thought in environmental ethics is that we need to ground any properly moral concern for the environment on some sort of valuable feature or property. We saw this reflected in the focus on goal-directedness above. Another, perhaps more orthodox property to base an environmental ethic around is sentience. More radically, some have proposed the ground of moral concern to be the integrity of an entire ecological system, the ‘biosphere’, where the individuals that inhabit the system are of value ultimately because of their contribution to it. This search for a moral foundation tends to proceed in the same way whether one thinks that there is just one basic valuable property, or whether one thinks that there are many. But these claims are not only about the foundation of environmental concern. In addition, philosophers tend to assert that their favoured value claim must also feature in our practical reasoning when we do what morality requires of us. Thus, we are supposed to reason from a purported value to some conclusion which respects, promotes, or maximises it.

However, there is little prima facie reason to limit the scope of moral reasoning in advance in this way. Consider the following example from Hursthouse:

“Some years ago, when the rising of the seas and the consequent higher sea levels at high tide were recognized to be having an unmistakeable deleterious impact, I remember reading that someone had brightly suggested we could solve the problem by blowing up the moon. And every environmentalist was (surely rightly) horrified, notwithstanding the inanimate nature of the moon”.

I would add that this scenario would not only be horrifying to environmentalists, but to most of us. Whether or not we think that the moon is the kind of thing that should be attributed ‘value’, it seems clear enough that there is something fundamentally wrong with the kind of reasoning that would justify its destruction. Provided this were even a scientifically viable option, a person who actually thought that the solution to rising sea levels would be to destroy the most permanent feature of our night sky, something that has been looked up at by human beings since they first evolved, and something that plays such a vital role in the forms of life of so many different kinds of creature seems to be missing out on an important aspect of what it is to be alive on this planet. Unless one already holds assumptions about what must feature in practical reasoning if it is to be morally correct, there is little reason to think that ordinary considerations like this must be reduced to more basic value notions.

37 This is how hedonic utilitarians such as Peter Singer discuss environmental ethics. For instance, see his Practical Ethics, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 245-55. See also Janna Thompson, “A Refutation of Environmental Ethics,” Environmental Ethics 12, no. 2 (1990).


What do we stand to lose without clearly delineated foundational values? Some might worry that without a claim for moral standing or intrinsic value in nature, answering questions about which environmental goods ought to be protected, respected, admired or promoted will be difficult, if not impossible. Thus, philosophers often provide not only one or more value claim to ground their view, but also a scale of values that enables them to generate at least a *prima facie* set of moral outcomes.40 This is supposed to works as follows: if there must be a choice between assisting something with a greater degree of value (say, sentience), and between assisting something with comparatively less value (say, ecosystemic integrity), then, after adding a variety of saving *ceteris paribus* clauses, we would conclude that we ought to assist the more valuable entity.

However, it is not obvious after all that we actually make deliberation any clearer by appealing to claims about what has value. For this apparently straightforward way of delineating the boundaries of moral concern, and then ranking entities according to the degree to which they possess the value in question actually turns out to be no real short cut for further deliberation.41 For example, Hursthouse asks whether a human (higher value) should rescue a cat (lower value) from a burning building, risking herself in the process. As Hursthouse points out, any sensible response to this question depends on the particular details of the example. And, once we weigh each of the considerations that are likely to emerge when all of the particular details are on the table, there often ceases to be any obvious *prima facie* response. Rather than relying on the apparent moral standing of the cat, much will depend on those particular features of the context, which include, for instance, the relative risk involved, the value I place on my own life, the value placed on it by my friends and relatives, and whether I own the cat, denoting personal responsibility for its welfare. Thus, knowing about the supposed relative moral standing of the cat does not generate an easy conclusion even in a supposedly simple case such as this.

I claim that much of the substantive discussion about what has environmental value can be recast to focus instead on the actual reasons characteristic of environmentally virtuous people. In Aristotle’s discussion of the virtues, the notion of acting for a virtuous reason is integral to understanding what a virtue actually entails. Consider what is said about the virtue of courage: Aristotle thinks that the courageous person stands firm in the face of danger, not because he enjoys facing dangers, but because he perceives something worth standing up for. Aristotle might have said that the courageous person acts courageously to protect the moral worth of human beings, or to preserve the political community, or indeed in defence of an important ideal. But all he says is that the virtuous person acts on account of the noble. While the description ‘acting on account of what is noble or fine’ is ambiguous, it is clearly not reducible to a foundational claim about the worth of persons, states of affairs, ideals or institutions. Instead, this is another way of saying that the virtuous person acts for an appropriate reason, which involves identifying something as good, whether that be an object, a person’s life, her community, or the important institutions that humans depend on as social creatures.

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40 For discussion of a hierarchy of environmental value, see Robin Attfield, *Value, Obligation, and Meta-Ethics* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1995), 79-86.
In her discussion of the reasons that the virtuous take to be reasons for acting, Hursthouse claims that "the virtuous agent chooses virtuous actions for at least one of a certain type or range of reasons, X', where ‘the type or range X’ is typical of, and differs according to, whichever virtue is in question". And the reasons that are typical of a virtue are just those on account of which a virtuous person would act. But these are manifestly ordinary reasons, and require no philosophical sophistication. Instead, a courageous person might give a reason such as "I saw smoke pouring out from under the door, and thought there were people inside". Identifying reasons like this is important, Hursthouse says, because doing so allows us to "understand what made the action in question seem, to a virtuous agent, an appropriate thing to do in the circumstances". If we question someone about the reason that he acted virtuously, and we find his response genuine, then these reasons are apt to show "what the agent took as relevant or salient, advantageous or disadvantageous, good or evil, decisive or compelling, about the action or the situation or both". Understood in this way, the phrase ‘acting on account of the noble’ is actually a gloss for the range of ordinary reasons that are appropriate to particular virtues.

How, we might ask, does the virtuous person know which reasons are the right ones? In a sense, this goes with simply being a virtuous person. As Hursthouse points out, "[t]he virtuous agent, ex hypothesi, gets these things right, and this is what provides the contrast between acting virtuously, in the way the virtuous person acts, and doing what she does but for the wrong reasons". But these reasons are not the right ones ‘all things considered’, or from an impartial or ‘moral’ point of view. They are right, or good reasons not only because they are the reasons of virtuous people, but also because they are appropriate in the context of deliberation or response from which they in fact emerge. Moreover, understanding these reasons as the right reasons will not be automatic for just anyone, as if from a neutral point of view. As Hursthouse says, a person’s grasp of “what is involved in acting virtuously, in acting for the right reasons, is not separable from one’s grasp of what each of the virtues involves, and one’s grasp of that is not separable from possession of the virtues themselves, at least to some degree”.

If we consider the variety of claims about environmental value, this already suggests to us that a wide range of considerations are likely to be relevant when we talk about what matters and why. Sandler and others are right to emphasise that in some sense the fact that all living things have goods of their own, simply in the sense of having the capacity to be benefitted or harmed, is a general requirement for reasons pertaining to their being benefitted or harmed to obtain. What this means, then, is that the fact that something is alive is already, in many cases, a reason to regard it in a certain way. A person that is caring, benevolent, or compassionate might cite this fact as a reason for responding to a living thing in a way that reflects the status of this reason, but notice that simply being alive will not look like a compelling reason if taken in isolation from other evaluative beliefs and attitudes: consider, for instance, the ways in which

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43 Ibid., 128.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 129.
47 Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 129-30. As Hursthouse notes, this implies that the virtuous do not act “for the same reason every time”.
48 Ibid., 130.
small children appear to take great delight in stomping on insects. From such unpromising beginnings, coming to see the fact that something is alive as a reason for responding to it in a certain way is certainly a habituated response. It is also perhaps the most basic kind of recognition we might have for living things, involving as it does a recognition of the fragility of life, and of the remarkable drive for survival that is manifest in all living things, including ourselves. But this is not to suggest that such a reason is not defeasible by other salient considerations. This is why the fact that a virus is alive does not even begin to suggest to us anything in the way of an appropriate positive response.

We are already familiar with many other reasons for responding to living things in certain ways. For instance, consider a person who stops to assist wildlife that have been injured by the roadside: if pressed to explain why they saw the need to help, we might expect to hear responses such as "because I saw it was hurt, and thought I could help". In other circumstances, environmentally virtuous people might look beyond individual creatures because they see compelling reasons of a much broader scope. For instance, sometimes in order to care for nature we might need to behave in ways that would in other circumstances be uncaring or destructive, for instance by engaging in the culling of invasive species to protect native species and ecosystems. Or consider appeals to protect endangered species, such as the Orang-utan currently under threat from the destruction of native rainforest to make way for palm oil plantations in Indonesia. The reasons why we should boycott palm oil products, and should support campaigns to protect the habitat of the Orang-utan can refer to the wrongness of causing the extinction of this highly intelligent, social primate. Thus, we will also typically recognise reasons that are associated with the protection of endangered species, considered as such, as well as reasons associated with the wrongness of inflicting pain and suffering on sentient creatures.

The account given thus far of environmentally virtuous reasons is only meant to indicate the general kind of answer that an approach to environmental philosophy can give to questions about what matters, and why. It is a kind of answer that does not rely on a fixed set of claims about environmental value, but relies instead on our practical responses and ways of reasoning about what to do. Far more needs to be said about how these reasons get their motivational hold on us, and about what the distinctive attitudes and responses to the environment are. I will attempt this in the next three chapters. However, it is still possible to provisionally note some of the general features that I have suggested will be distinctive of the reasoning of environmentally virtuous people. First, we have seen that these considerations will be contextual, since the particular features of moral cases seem to be prima facie more significant in determining what to do than a pre-existing value calculus that can be wheeled out to resolve difficulties. Second, because we are rational, social animals with the ability to give and to critically assess both our own reasons and the reasons of other people, the reasons that we give will themselves be revisable, in light of other, better considerations. Third, since our reasons are our own, and since they are reasons why we choose to behave in the ways that we do, our reasons will be appropriately motivating to us; for if they are not, we may conclude that they were not really reasons for us. Therefore, we do not need to explain why it is that virtuous people should find their reasons motivating in the ways that they characteristically do.

V.

49 My thanks to Rosalind Hursthouse for discussion of this example.
Although I have argued that much of the substantive discussion about moral value or standing can be fruitfully re-cast as a discussion about the characteristic reasons of virtuous people, there is no denying that claims about the intrinsic value of environmental entities have become common features of our evaluative discourses. For instance, in their large survey of Western European attitudes towards nature, de Groot et al. found that “[v]irtually all respondents believe that humans are morally responsible for nature and recognize the intrinsic value of nature”. Similar results have been reported elsewhere, and some well-known opponents of claiming intrinsic values in nature have recently acknowledged the prevalence and importance of such claims in actual environmental discourse. Ignoring these claims would therefore involve making a significant revision of ordinary ethical discourse, which is something that virtue ethicists should generally aim to avoid given that virtue and vice concepts find their place in among the ‘thick’ discourses of existing human communities.

How can claims about the intrinsic value of environmental entities, collectives or ecosystems be accommodated without falling into the ways of thinking encountered above? Before answering this, perhaps it would be helpful to mark out the terrain of environmental values more properly. The debate about what an adequate theory of environmental ethics should be has been roughly synonymous with the long-running disputes about the nature of environmental values. In the early years of environmental ethics, it was often claimed that human arrogance was responsible for environmental degradation and insensitivity. It was thought that a toxic anthropocentric worldview was responsible for our environmental crises, allegedly because such a worldview justified human arrogance toward the natural world. Perhaps the originator of the criticism is the historian Lynn White, Jr., who claimed that Christianity, the dominant Western religion, was “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen”. According to White, Christian anthropocentrism had infected Western worldviews, which assumed along with it “a dualism of man and nature”. And, just like the Christian insistence that it was “God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends”, Westerners apparently assumed that human beings had an unreserved right to appropriate nature to satisfy any human interests, however trivial or unnecessary these interests might be.

According to White's criticism, anthropocentric views are not only problematic in their own right, but have also been responsible for a range of human-induced environmental crises because they encouraged attitudes of mastery or domination over nature. The key aspect of this critique of anthropocentrism was therefore the assumption that only human beings and their interests could be morally significant, and this feature is certainly not difficult to detect in the

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50 Mirjam de Groot, Drenthen, Martin, de Groot, Wouter T., “Public Visions of the Human/Nature Relationship and Their Implications for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 33, no. 1 (2011). The authors conclude that environmental ethics “is not an elite endeavour, but a commonly shared ideal of the Western world”.


54 Ibid. For another argument that the dominant Western cultural and religious traditions convey anthropocentric attitudes, see John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature; Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (New York: Scribner, 1974).
history of Western philosophical and religious thought.\textsuperscript{55} This picture of anthropocentrism is still perhaps best exposed in Richard Routley's 'Last Man' scenario.\textsuperscript{56} In one of the defining papers of environmental ethics, Routley constructed a series of thought experiments, the most famous of which is his 'Last Man' scenario, in which he asks whether the last human being, who is the sole survivor of a global catastrophe, is permitted to go around “eliminating, as far as he can, every living thing, animal, or plant (but painlessly if you like, as at the best abattoirs)”.\textsuperscript{57} With this example, Routley managed to capture the intuition that there is something wrong with the thoughtless destruction of wild species and natural environments by human beings, even when no further human interests are harmed in the process.\textsuperscript{58}

Nonanthropocentric philosophies thus appealed to foundational values in nature in opposition to a perceived ‘instrumentalisation’ of nature for human purposes. J. Baird Callicott gives perhaps the clearest statement of this conviction. Callicott claims that intrinsic values in nature are required to resist a reduction of environmental goods “to cost benefit analyses in which valued natural aesthetic, religious, and epistemic experiences are shadow priced and weighed against the usually overwhelming material and economic benefits of development and exploitation”.\textsuperscript{59} However, disagreements about the nature and justification of these claims soon caused environmental ethics to become embroiled in controversies about the nature and normativity of moral values. As Callicott puts it, “the problem of constructing an adequate theory of intrinsic value for nonhuman entities and for nature as a whole” became the “central and most recalcitrant problem for environmental ethics”.\textsuperscript{60}

However, John O’Neill has argued that the notions of moral value operative in these debates are often confused.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, O’Neill identified four distinct senses of ‘intrinsic value’ in the environmental ethics literature:

1) intrinsic value as the conceptual opposite of instrumental value;
2) intrinsic value in the Kantian sense of something being an end in itself;
3) intrinsic value as the conceptual opposite of extrinsic value, which relies on possession of an attribute or quality that is intrinsic to an entity;

\textsuperscript{55} For instance, see: Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 1256a; Thomas Aquinas, \textit{That Rational Animals Are Governed for Their Own Sakes, While Others Are Governed in Subordination to Them}; René Descartes, \textit{Animals Don’t Think; Animals as Automata}; Immanuel Kant, \textit{Duties to Animals}. In contrast to these views are the positions of Bentham and the utilitarians following him, which held that suffering is bad wherever it occurs, whether in nonhuman animals or human beings.


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 207.

\textsuperscript{58} Routley (p. 205) cites Aldo Leopold: “A farmer who clears the woods off a 75% slope, turns his cows into the clearing, and dumps its rainfall, rocks and soil into the community creek, is still (if otherwise decent) a respected member of society”. In response, Routley claims that in an adequate theory of environmental ethics the behaviour of this farmer would be “accounted morally wrong, and the farmer subject to proper moral criticism”.

\textsuperscript{59} Callicott, \textit{In Defense of the Land Ethic : Essays in Environmental Philosophy}, 163. Perhaps unwittingly, Callicott is here offering an instrumental justification for intrinsic value.

\textsuperscript{60} "Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics," \textit{Environmental Ethics} 7, no. 3 (1985): 271.

intrinsic value as a conceptual synonym for objective value, which involves the claim that what is intrinsically valuable must be so independently of the evaluations of human beings.\textsuperscript{62}

According to O’Neill, one of the most common mistakes was to conflate the idea that intrinsic value was both non-instrumental value as ethical standing with the idea that intrinsic value is a kind of objective value.\textsuperscript{63} The assumption behind this particular mistake was that the only way to establish the ethical standing of aspects of nonhuman nature would be to establish the existence of real, objective ethical properties, on account of which these aspects are morally considerable. However, as O’Neill noted, this assumption turns out to be false: intrinsic value can be the conceptual opposite of instrumental value, and also entail a claim about moral standing within subjectivist theories such as expressivism. As O’Neill points out, there is no purely conceptual reason to think that an expressivist must attribute non-instrumental value “only to her own or other human’s states”.\textsuperscript{64}

Similarly, proponents of environmental virtue generally assumed not only that any adequate ethic of the environment must be nonanthropocentric, but also that nonanthropocentrism entails a commitment to intrinsic values in nature in one of the four senses outlined above.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed, in Sandler’s account, many of these meanings seem to be invoked simultaneously: goal directed living things are opposed to things with merely instrumental value, are to be treated as ends in themselves, and are valued because of the possession of a property (goal-directedness) that is intrinsic to them.\textsuperscript{66}

But, although the conceptual opposition of intrinsic and instrumental values is one of the defining features of nonanthropocentric philosophies, there are good grounds for thinking it to be mistaken. Christine Korsgaard has argued that the apparent contrast between intrinsic value and instrumental value depends on additional theoretical assumptions about the nature of normativity in ethics.\textsuperscript{67} Instead, according to Korsgaard, something that is valued for its own sake is something that is valued as an end, which is the opposite of something that is valued instrumentally, or for what it brings about. Something which is instead intrinsically or inherently valuable is something which “has its goodness in itself. It refers, one might say, to the location or source of the goodness rather than the way we value the thing”.\textsuperscript{68}

Korsgaard illustrates this point by considering Kant’s view about unqualified value. As Korsgaard points out, for Kant only the good will has its goodness in itself, since it is the only thing that is good without qualification.\textsuperscript{69} Further, for Kant the good will is the only

\textsuperscript{62}"Meta-Ethics," 164-65.
\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{65}This is unsurprising given the influence enjoyed by Sandler’s view of environmental virtue.
\textsuperscript{66}Sandler adopts Paul Taylor’s attribution of natural value, according to which all goal-directed organisms are worthy of moral consideration in their own right, and according to which all moral agents ought to promote the flourishing of inherently worthy organisms “as an end in itself”. See Taylor, Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics, 75.
\textsuperscript{67}Christine M. Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” Philosophical Review 92, no. 2 (1983).
\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 170.
\textsuperscript{69}In the opening of the Groundwork, Kant claims: “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will”. Immanuel Kant, The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals / Translated and Analysed by H.J. Paton, ed. H. J. Paton (London ; New York: Routledge, 1991), 323: 1-3.
unconditioned good, and is the condition of the goodness of all other goods.\textsuperscript{70} As Korsgaard writes, “[f]or Kant, the end/means distinction can be said to be a distinction in the way we value things. By contrast, the unconditioned/conditioned distinction is a distinction... in the circumstances (conditions) in which they are objectively good. A thing is unconditionally good if it is good under any and all conditions, if it is good no matter what the context. In order to be unconditionally good, a thing must obviously carry its value with it – have its goodness in itself (be an end in itself).”\textsuperscript{71}

This means that Kantian goodwill is not only the sole unconditioned good thing, but also the condition of goodness of all other potential goods. Korsgaard puts the point as follows:

“just as to explain a thing fully we would have to find its unconditioned first cause, so to justify a thing fully (where justify is “to show that it is objectively good”) we should have to show that all the conditions of its goodness were met, regressing on the conditions until we came to what is unconditioned. Since the good will is the only unconditionally good thing, this means that it must be the source and condition of all the goodness in the world; goodness, as it were, flows into the world from the good will, and there would be none without it.”\textsuperscript{72}

Korsgaard is here invoking Kant’s account of moral goods against a possible regress of justification: that is, if we are asked to justify the goodness of each conditionally good thing, i.e., each thing that depends on something further for its goodness, we must at some point find a stopping-point or else face the prospect of an infinite regress of justification that undermines our claims of moral value.

An analogous point may be made about the justification of our goods from the perspective of virtue ethics. In Book I of the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Aristotle claims that we must appeal to a larger formal structure to justify the goodness of our ends:

“If then there is some end in our practical projects that we wish for because of itself, while wishing for the other things we wish for because of it, and we do not choose everything because of something else (for if that is the case, the sequence will go on to infinity, making our desire empty and vain), it is clear that this will be the good, i.e. the chief good” (1094a18-22).\textsuperscript{73}

Similarly with Kant, Aristotle is claiming that if our desires are not to be “empty and vain” (i.e., without a coherent justification), we need to place them into some larger framing. Aristotle gives us a classification of goods to show how this framing can be brought to bear:

“Now we say that what is worth pursuing for itself is more complete (teleioteron) than what is worth pursuing because of something else, and what is never desirable because of something else is more complete than those things that are desirable both for themselves and because of it; while

\textsuperscript{70} Kant writes that the good will “must it need not on this account be the sole and complete good, but it must be the highest good and the condition of all the rest, even of all our demands for happiness”. Ibid., 396.

\textsuperscript{71} Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," 178.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 181-82. Korsgaard writes: “In order for there to be any objectively good ends, however, there must be something that is unconditionally good and so can serve as a sufficient condition of their goodness”.

\textsuperscript{73} Aristotle, \textit{ Aristotle : Nicomachean Ethics / Translation (with Historical Introduction) by Christopher Rowe ; Philosophical Introduction and Commentary by Sarah Broadie}, ed. Sarah Broadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
what is complete without qualification is what is always desirable in itself and never because of something else. Happiness (eudaimonia) seems most of all to be like this; for this we do always choose because of itself and never because of something else, while as for honour, and pleasure, and intelligence, and every excellence, we do choose them because of themselves (since if nothing resulted from them, we would still choose each of them), but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that we shall be happy through them” (1097b1-5).74

In this passage, Aristotle claims that happiness is the most ‘complete’ good because it is never desirable for the sake of something further. No other good can be conceivably added which would improve the value of happiness, for it stands alone as good ‘without qualification’.75 And, as such, the concept of eudaimonia, like Kant’s concept of the good will, is supposed to be the stopping point standing in front of a regress of justification, without which the goodness of our purported goods can never be properly justified.76 According to Aristotle, the next class of goods are things that are good in themselves and for what they bring about. Aristotle lists pleasure, honour, and intelligence as examples of these. However, Aristotle also claims that the moral virtues are of this second general sort: they are good in themselves, but they are also good because of their effects. And, as Aristotle makes clear, these goods in particular will be to enable us to live characteristically good human lives, being a completion of the part of our nature that can ‘listen to reason’.77 The remaining third kind of good are things that are good only for the sake of what they bring about, and are hence means to further goods only.78

If, as I have suggested above, virtue ethics seems to encourage us to think about intrinsic value in terms of the recognition of worthwhile things by virtuous people, then notice that what results from combining this with an Aristotelian classification of goods is quite a different picture of moral value from any of those outlined above. On this view, we can preserve the ways in which intrinsically valued goods are contrasted with things that are purely instrumentally good, but we cannot claim that intrinsic values are conceptually defined in opposition to instrumental goods. Instead, intrinsically valued things will be good in themselves, but they will also be good because they contribute to the goodness of our lives. And this way of looking at environmental value, I claim, promises to respect the variety of ways in which people already do value nature.

If we focus on the actual reasons of people that we consider to be environmentally virtuous, we will likely find reasons that reflect the values of living things, of ecosystems, of species, of wilderness, and even of inanimate objects such as rock formations. It is here, with the

74 Ibid.
75 Aristotle claims that happiness is both the most complete (teleiotaton) and self-sufficient (autarkeias) good at 1097b-c.
76 For further discussion of this similarity between Kant and Aristotle, see Mark LeBar, The Value of Living Well (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), Ch. 5. LeBar (p. 123) argues here that all eudaimonists, along with Kant, are committed to the following claim about the conditionality of value: “The values of a wide and important range of things we care about are conditional upon their relation with some other unconditional good”.
77 Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, 1098a2-18.
78 Elsewhere, Korsgaard discusses Aristotle’s own conclusion in Book X of the Nichomachean Ethics, which is that the life of contemplation fulfils the requirements of human happiness. See "Aristotle and Kant on the Source of Value," Ethics 96, no. 3 (1986). Korsgaard plausibly claims that for Aristotle the life of contemplation is the source of value in the same way that in Kant’s thought it is our rational nature which provides the source of our values; in both cases, contemplation is what makes a human life worth living, and confers worth on other goods in one’s life.
considerations, behaviour, and ultimately the dispositions of people that we believe to be environmentally virtuous, that we should look in discussing values in nature. Moreover, the dispositions of such people, and the values that they recognise, are themselves good things not only in themselves but also because of the characteristic and partly constitutive role they play in their own lives. Far from it being the case that nonanthropocentric value judgements are hard to accommodate, we can make sense of them only by placing these values into a larger framing that explains why they are values for creatures like us.

Virtue ethicists who follow Aristotle on this point think that this larger framing is the human good, understood (at least at this point) as a merely formal notion with no substantive content of its own: our flourishing is our living well as human beings, but it is up to us to work out what this might consist in. If we accept an Aristotelian framing, then we must also accept the point that the only thing that can be good without qualification is flourishing, or happiness (eudaimonia). Similarly with the Kantian view outlined above, according to which all goods depend on the transformative presence of the good will, and are consequently fundamentally extrinsic goods, an Aristotelian approach to moral value must hold that goods are partly conditional on their being constitutively involved in our living well as human beings. This point makes it impossible for intrinsic values to be good without qualification in the way that some environmental philosophers have thought they must be.

Perhaps, as David Wiggins has suggested, environmental ethics should start with a “human scale of values”, and work out how environmental values find their place within such a scale, rather than resorting to exotic metaphysical claims about values in nature and properties that must somehow make normative claims upon us. As Wiggins says, questions about the sustainability of current development policies can be raised within the familiar framing of human values, because unsustainable actions or policies “harm things or activities that we value for their instrumental or constitutive role in the promotion of human interests”. However, Wiggins also points out that the human scale of values is broader than what is usually understood by the concept of ‘human interests’. For Wiggins, “[n]othing so simple will account for the other concerns... the disappearance of the barn owl, partridge, otter, brown hare, cowslip, marsh marigold, for instance”. Wiggins urges us not to conceive of what is wrong with the disappearance of these things as “a lament for the disappearance of biodiversity as an end in itself (how could that, as such, be an end in itself?) or as an expression of alarm for the disappearance of genetic kinds that might prove indispensible to our future food supplies, pharmacology or biotechnology”. Instead, Wiggins claims:

"It is a lament at the disappearance – for which we as a species are directly or indirectly solely responsible (since we have caused it) – of all sorts of things human beings have loved or delighted in, and might still in the future love or delight in, with the option to find indefinitely many other such things for whose loss we could scarcely imagine ourselves being compensated. Like hedgerows, wetlands, meadows, and the other things for whose loss or devastation the author and

79 For discussion of the formal structure of eudaimonist thinking in Aristotle, see Annas, The Morality of Happiness, Ch. 1.
81 Ibid., 9.
82 Ibid.
many other people find themselves inconsolable, these form one part of the great framework for a
life on earth in which human beings can find meaning”.83

Importantly, then, what can count as a good from a human perspective is already significantly
broader than critics of anthropocentrism often claim. For a ‘human scale of values’ must include
many other aspects which lend our lives part of their meaning, such as cherishing the sight of
wild creatures living their lives, or delighting in birdsong, or feeling the insignificance of many
of our mundane concerns beneath the starry sky. These and very many other instances suggest
that some of the characteristic ways in which we find meaning in our lives are through contact
with nature, a contact which is itself partly conditioned by and dependent upon aspects of our
cultural identity and to the locality in which we live. In this way it is possible to claim that
recognising the worth of living things, or ecosystems, as a mark of human excellence is just the
same kind of claim (or at least remarkably similar) as recognising the worth of human beings,
works of art, or valued institutions as responses typical of virtuous people. No special claim
about moral standing or intrinsic value makes all this possible. Instead, it is reflection on the
place of our values in our lives which can ultimately justify the goodness of our values, and in so
doing, can broaden the ways in which we think about what it is to live a fully human life.

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83 Ibid., 10.


Environmental Virtue and Human Good

Introduction

Many people seem to believe that there is a tension between trying to help the environment and trying to live a happy, fulfilling life. This belief is echoed by environmental philosophers, who argue that the aim of living an environmentally sensitive life can come apart from the aim of living a good life. This argument is supposed to show that eudaimonist philosophies have little to offer to environmental ethics. However, I argue here that there is no obvious tension between the aim of trying to live well, and the aim of trying to live sustainably. Moreover, I claim that when we reflect on what it is for a human being to live well, we have to consider a range of facts about our common human nature as a species of rational, social animal. And in asking how we should live, we reveal strong reasons to think that environmental considerations feature importantly in any adequate answer we might give.

I.

There seems to be a general belief in contemporary society that helping the environment must involve some sort of sacrifice or cost to individuals. A similar belief is also held by some philosophers, who argue that the aim of living an environmentally sensitive life can come apart from the aim of living a good life.¹ This criticism is directed against environmental philosophers inspired by the ethical philosophy of Aristotle, which holds that the valuable aims, goals, and goods in life are part of eudaimonia, or happiness. Thus, this criticism maintains that the things we should do to protect the environment, and hence the people we should strive to become, might be different from what we should aim to do and who we should aim to be in order to live happily or well. The clearest statement of this objection comes from Christine Swanton.² Swanton writes:

“[C]onsider a person who has a character trait of active devotion to causes in which he believes passionately. He is ahead of his time in foreseeing environmental disaster, which will not, however, occur in his lifetime... he works tirelessly and persistently in efforts to persuade people of the danger. Despite his dire warnings and his interpersonal skill, he is not taken seriously. Unsurprisingly, this puts him under great stress. He dies, of a heart attack, in despair”.³

Swanton claims that although “[p]ossessing and manifesting a trait of persistence in the face of relentless opposition is not a good bet for personal flourishing”, it is “not obvious that such a trait is not a virtue when habitually directed at a good cause”.⁴ Ronald Sandler has echoed this thought, arguing that the considerations of such a person are “distinguished from eudaimonistic

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² Swanton, Virtue Ethics : A Pluralistic View, 94.
³ Ibid., 83.
⁴ Ibid.
considerations precisely because they concern ends or values independent of an agent’s own flourishing".5

To be clear, no one is claiming that eudaimonistic considerations have nothing to offer environmental ethics. Instead, the claim is that what we should do to protect or preserve the environment might come apart from what we should do in order to live well, and hence, from who we ought to strive to become. In order to properly assess this claim, however, we first need to become clearer about what is intended by ‘human flourishing’ according to eudaimonist philosophers. Contemporary discussions typically focus around two key theses, which are:

i) the agent-benefit view, i.e. that the virtues benefit their possessor, enabling him to flourish;
ii) the human flourishing view, i.e. that the virtues are required for human beings to live characteristically good human lives.6

Although Aristotle appears to endorse both theses, there is considerable controversy about which of these theses actually should provide the justification for eudaimonism.7 Nonetheless, Rosalind Hursthouse has argued convincingly that both theses (when properly understood) are defensible in their own right, and further that they can be seen as interrelated and mutually reinforcing.8 Hursthouse notes that the greater controversy centres around acceptance of thesis (i), which seems to justify virtues on the ground that they (actually) benefit their possessor in living his life. But according to Hursthouse, when properly understood, thesis (i) means only that virtues are a reliable bet for both individual and social flourishing.9 On this view, thesis (i) could only be falsified if there were a clearly identifiable pattern of virtues not benefitting their possessors; if this were so, we would obviously not even try to inculcate virtues in children from a young age.10

According to the second thesis of eudaimonism, a virtue is something which makes human beings good or excellent members of their species. This thesis is a cornerstone of the ‘natural goodness’ view in ethics.11 The central idea of the second thesis is that whenever we say that

5 Sandler, *Character and Environment : A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics*, 27-28. Sandler maintains that if one were to include ends or values that are independent of flourishing on the basis that being properly responsive to them is a part of what it means to lead a flourishing life, then one would thereby sacrifice “the distinctive content of eudaimonism” in favour of “pluralism in what makes a trait a virtue”.
6 For a thorough discussion of these two theses, and the reasons for accepting them, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 8.
9 This is obviously much broader than the claim that virtues are pleasant or enjoyable from the agent’s perspective. As Hursthouse notes, the question to ask in determining whether a particular virtue conforms to (i) should not focus on whether particular instances of virtuous activity benefit their possessor, but about whether virtuous activity is generally a benefit.
something is good, we mean that it is a good \( x \), that is, a good member of its kind.\(^{12}\) Thus, facts about particular species are significant in determining whether an individual is a good member of its species. The objection raised by Swanton, and echoed by others, aims to show that acting to protect or preserve the environment is (at least potentially) incompatible with either one (or both) of these two theses.

In arguing against this criticism, we need not show that anyone with the virtues is guaranteed to be flourishing. Although some philosophers, notably Plato and the Stoics, believed that virtue was both necessary and sufficient for flourishing, the Aristotelian claim is significantly weaker, holding only that the virtues are our best bet if we want to live well.\(^{13}\) According to Aristotle, the life of Priam shows how being virtuous does not insulate one from the vicissitudes of life: although Priam was widely regarded as a virtuous ruler, he nonetheless suffered a total reversal of fortune during the sack of Troy, ending in his death, the total devastation of his family and the destruction of his nation. Aristotle used this example to show that virtue alone cannot protect one from reversals of fortune such as this, which depend more upon luck than the choices associated with one’s agency. But there is no inconsistency here so long as possession of the virtues is thought to be a reliable bet for flourishing only, but never a guarantee against disasters that are beyond our control. On this view, human beings require more than just the virtues to live well; we also require favourable external conditions, such as freedom from the sorts of disasters experienced by Priam, not only to actually allow the development of the virtues in the first place, but also because without them even the most virtuous people can be prevented from flourishing.\(^{14}\)

Now, Swanton’s example of the ‘unhappy environmentalist’ showed a person who appeared to be virtuous, but miserable. We thus seem to have a person whose virtues are not, as it turns out, his best bet for flourishing. But this example would only present a genuine problem if it were usually the case that people failed to flourish precisely because of the admirable environmental traits they possessed. As Hursthouse notes, “[w]e think that (for the most part, by and large), if we act well, things go well for us”. And when this does not occur, “that’s not ‘what we should have expected’ but tragically bad luck”.\(^{15}\) Aristotle’s discussion of Priam appears to draw on this same commonsense judgement, since it is hard not to think that but for the Greek assault on Troy, Priam’s life would have turned out dramatically differently.

If the relationship between virtue and flourishing is not sufficient, we may wonder whether it is really even necessary. Why might a person not flourish without the virtues? As Bernard Williams has remarked, those who claim this often rely on examples that appear more compelling when viewed from a distance; when we fill in the details, we often find that the ‘flourishing’ of the escaped Nazi war criminal or underworld leader is in reality not what it might have appeared.\(^{16}\) Similarly, the absence of detail adds to the apparent force of Swanton’s

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\(^{12}\) The idea that ‘good’ is an attributive adjective with a (relatively) fixed meaning is from Peter Geach’s “Good and Evil,” *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956).

\(^{13}\) It is commonly thought that Plato and the Stoics do hold virtue to be also sufficient for eudaimonia. For an overview of this point in ancient philosophy, see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Ch. 1.

\(^{14}\) Indeed, Aristotle makes clear that virtuous people stand to lose more than ordinary people when facing disasters, since they among all people find their lives to be worthwhile and enjoyable. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III.

\(^{15}\) Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 185.

\(^{16}\) Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 46.
'unhappy environmentalist' example. For instance, Swanton asks us to imagine that this person has no family, so that his activism could not be motivated by personal or familial reasons. But even so, what about his other relationships? If he has no romantic attachments, does he not also have any friends? If not, then we have already found one reason why this person's life seems to have been overly bleak and unrewarding. As Aristotle says, a life without friendship is a life that no one would choose, even if it were filled with all other desirable goods in life. If this person is somehow unable to have any of these fundamental human relationships, then there is clearly something missing from his life.

Furthermore, even if we concede that this example shows how one could be environmentally virtuous and miserable at the same time, this on its own still does not invalidate eudaimonism because assessments of agent flourishing do not depend solely upon a person's mental states. In several works, John O'Neill has explored how evaluations of the goodness of a person's life depend more on the narrative shape of that life than on discrete mental states, or even a pervading sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction one might have. Consider the following examples:

1. *Orson Welles*. His early career is full of success. He directs one of the most important films in cinema history. As his life progresses it is a story of failed promise. He ends his life doing voice-overs for fish-finger adverts.

2. *Welles Orson*. He starts his life doing voice-overs for fish finger adverts. His talents develop as his life progresses. He ends his life directing one of the most important films in cinema history.

As O'Neill points out, we think that the life of Welles Orson goes better than the life of Orson Welles, because it is a life of improvement in achieving worthwhile ends, while the latter is a life of rapid decline. The life of Wittgenstein, and Wittgenstein's own final assessment of his life, is another often discussed example of this point. Moreover, the narrative shape of one's life is also plausibly affected by what happens after one has died. If someone were to devote his life to a worthwhile cause, be it a scientific discovery, a humanitarian project or whatever, then the worthiness of that cause must be reaffirmed by future generations if that person's life is to be regarded as a success.

What this means is that our evaluation of the life of the 'unhappy environmentalist' must look to more than just his apparent misery and early demise. If, as Swanton suggests, he is somehow ahead of his time in recognising the severity of environmental threats, then we should indeed admire his foresight and his commitment to goals whose importance we were slower to

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18 "Happiness and the Good Life," 136.

19 The following passage from Norman Malcolm’s memoir of Wittgenstein shows this clearly: "Before losing consciousness he said to Mrs. Bevan ... 'Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life!' By ‘them’ he undoubtedly meant his close friends. When I think of his profound pessimism, the intensity of his mental and moral suffering, the relentless way in which he drove his intellect, his need for love together with the harshness that repelled love, I am inclined to believe that his life was fiercely unhappy. Yet at the end he himself exclaimed that it had been ‘wonderful’! To me this seems a mysterious and strangely moving utterance”. From his *Ludwig Wittgenstein : A Memoir ; with a Biographical Sketch by G.H. Von Wright*, ed. G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 81.

20 For further discussion, see *Ecology, Policy, and Politics : Human Well-Being and the Natural World*, Ch. 3.
appreciate. This is not to suggest that we cannot feel sympathy for him. Nor is it to implausibly suggest that a life of unending misery and psychological torment could still be considered a flourishing life, no matter what such a person’s accomplishments or achievements were. Instead, all of these aspects are important in considering whether one is living a flourishing human life. But if we consider the lives of even the staunchest environmental activists, we typically find that a commitment to environmental causes does not crowd out all other human goods, such as friendship or love. There is no genuine zero-sum choice between environmental goods and human flourishing. Instead, if we look in more detail at the lives of some of the most important environmentalist figures, what we actually find is that their commitment to environmental causes adds to, rather than diminishes, their own sense of the meaning and worth of their lives.21

II.

Thus, the apparent tension between environmentalist commitments and behaviours and human wellbeing is not genuine. Without favourable background conditions, human beings will typically not flourish, even if they are otherwise virtuous. Virtue is thus best understood as a reliable bet for flourishing, but not a guarantee. But these points do not actually demonstrate that the converse is true, namely that doing what one can to protect or preserve the environment is in fact partly constitutive of human flourishing, in the same way that virtues like courage or generosity are thought to be. Although several philosophers have tried to make this case, in my view none of them has succeeded. In this section, I will explore the reasons for these failures, and in the final section I explore an alternative argument concerning how we might think about human flourishing in an age of environmental crisis.

Geoffrey Frasz has argued that extending the scope of virtues of benevolence to include all living things does in fact make for a more flourishing human life.22 According to Frasz, virtues of benevolence, including compassion, friendship, kindness, and gratitude, require us to respond to others on the basis of a concern for their own good. According to Frasz, a person with virtues of benevolence aims “to be open to the concerns, interests, goals, and needs of others and to actively pursue plans that would help others in these respects. Benevolence therefore calls on us first to cultivate in our character an imaginative dwelling on the condition of the other”.23 Thus, Frasz claims, “[a]n environmentally good person [i.e., one with virtues of benevolence] takes an active interest in promoting the flourishing of all the other members that make up the land. This expansion of the sphere of concern to non-human others makes up the first characteristic of environmental benevolence”.24 On this view, virtues of benevolence are

21 Supporting worthwhile causes, if this is done virtuously, is thus also satisfying and enjoyable in itself. For further discussion of this point, see Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 186.
23 Ibid., 124.
supposed to enable moral concern for "all living creatures, even those we might find disturbing, distasteful, or uninteresting to us and our concerns".\textsuperscript{25} And, according to Frasz, virtues of benevolence will typically benefit the agent who has them, both "directly, through the satisfaction of acting morally", and also "indirectly, through helping to create a better society for all".\textsuperscript{26} Thus, Frasz seems to be invoking both the 'agent-benefit' thesis that we encountered earlier, since virtues of benevolence give the agent the 'satisfaction of acting morally', and the 'species flourishing' thesis, since virtues of benevolence enable communities of human beings to lead better human lives.

However, there seems to be a serious problem with this proposal. The claim that benevolence requires us to be considerate of the goods of living things that we find "disturbing, distasteful, or uninteresting", suggests that benevolence requires a certain responsiveness that can potentially run counter to our own inclinations. But this is not typically the way to understand the requirements of a virtue. As John McDowell writes, a virtue is of necessity "something of which, on each of the relevant occasions, [the virtuous] is aware. A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour".\textsuperscript{27} As McDowell points out, this means that "a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity".\textsuperscript{28} This makes it quite hard to see how a benevolent person could find the goods of living things disturbing, uninteresting or distasteful; a person who is benevolent in the way Frasz is suggesting would already see the goods of living things positively as goods. Moreover, Frasz’ proposal does not show why we should think that being benevolent constitutes a necessary benefit for all humans as such. Recall that both theses of eudaimonism, taken together, require this: that a virtue is the kind of thing that constitutes a benefit to us because of the kind of creature that we are. These cannot simply be benefits that we might prefer, but could easily do without. But Frasz has not explained why we should think that human beings characteristically require a sensitivity to the goods of all living things if they are to live well.

A similar, yet more promising argument of this kind has been made by John O’Neill. O’Neill argues that the sensitivity to environmental goods which most characterises the environmentally virtuous person actually points to a higher development of our nature, which is thus an objectively better, but still characteristically human life.\textsuperscript{29} On this basis, O’Neill argues that "the flourishing of many other living things ought to be promoted because they are constitutive of our own flourishing".\textsuperscript{30} O’Neill uses friendship as a conceptual model to explore what a more virtuous relationship between human beings and nonhumans might look like. And although he does not insist on a literal friendship between nonhumans and humans, O’Neill argues that thinking about our relationship with nonhumans analogously with friendship encourages us to think about the range of other goods that interacting with the non-human world can open up for us. O’Neill builds this position upon the Aristotelian claim that the flourishing of human beings requires the development of many of our essential capacities,

\textsuperscript{25} Frasz, "Benevolence as an Environmental Virtue," 126.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," The Monist 62, no. 3 (1979): 331-33.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} O’Neill, Ecology, Policy, and Politics : Human Well-Being and the Natural World, 22-25.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 24.
which jointly contribute to our ability to lead characteristically good human lives. O’Neill claims that “[t]he education of the field ecologist develops powers of judgement, discrimination and observation – it renders the agent responsive to the qualities of the object”. Further, “[t]o extend our powers of perception from a disinterested perspective is to develop characteristically human capacities. It is to increase human well-being. A commitment to environmental goods is not independent of a concern with human well-being”. Failing to develop one’s perception in this way equates to a failure to perceive entities for what they actually are. Instead, other forms of perception, such as that of the wealth maximiser, amount to seeing things in the wrong terms. For, as Aldo Leopold wrote, “[t]he swoop of a hawk... is perceived by one as a drama of evolution. To another it is only a threat to a full frying pan”.

O’Neill believes that just as friendship is an important part of any flourishing human life, and just as friendship requires us to care about and promote the goods of friends for their own sake, we stand in an analogous relationship with nonhumans. That is, analogously with friendship, we ought to promote the goods of many nonhumans for their own sake, because doing so typically contributes to, and is partly constitutive of, a flourishing human life. Thus, according to O’Neill, caring about the goods of many nonhumans for their own sake is constitutive of human flourishing in just the same way that promoting the goods of friends is constitutive of human flourishing. O’Neill writes that “[s]uch care for the natural world is constitutive of a flourishing human life. The best human life is one that includes an awareness of and practical concern with the goods of entities in the non-human world”.

While this is a more attractive argument, we might still wonder whether concern for the well-being of (at least some) nonhumans is necessarily constitutive of human flourishing in the way that concern for the well-being of one’s friends is. Robin Attfield has pressed this objection, arguing that “while recognition and promotion of natural goods enrich our lives, so too could awareness of quite different ranges of objects of wonder, from mineral gemstones to synthetic gemstones, or again human performances from sport to ballet”. As Attfield argues, even if we believe that we contribute to our flourishing by developing certain perceptive capacities, “it cannot be inferred from their atrophy or their underdevelopment that a person is failing to flourish; for a range of their other powers (of physical prowess, of wit, of musical or artistic performance, or of other kinds of sensitivity such as empathy for friends) might be sufficiently developed as readily to compensate for the apparent deficiency”. Attfield concludes that “neither natural goods nor care for them are, strictly speaking, constitutive of a flourishing human life. To affirm that they are thus constitutive is, I suggest, wishful thinking”. Moreover,

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33 Ibid., 81.
34 Cited in ibid., 159.
37 Ibid., 37.
38 Attfield (pp. 37-8) argues that even certain natural goods are somehow constitutive of the human well-being, as O’Neill claims, there would still be simply too many species that fell outside this
even if human flourishing does involve the development of our characteristically human capacities, Attfield also points out that this does not require that the objects which we perceive and appreciate must themselves also flourish. An experienced hunter might develop keen powers of discrimination, patience, and observation, powers which we might consider to be improvements of his human capacities, without thereby becoming concerned with the flourishing of the creatures that he observes. This is a serious problem for O'Neill, who claimed that correctly perceiving natural entities entailed being disposed to promote many of their goods for their own sake. However, nothing like this follows from the claim that adequately appreciating nonhuman living things is partly constitutive of our flourishing.

Christopher Freiman has tried to resurrect something of O'Neill's argument. Freiman argues that human beings should cultivate "goodwill toward nature", which requires agents to "properly enjoy the flourishing of nature without conceiving its value in strictly instrumental terms". Further, Freiman asserts that having goodwill, "both towards humanity and nature, is part of living a good human life". But what does it mean to "properly enjoy" the good of nonhuman creatures? According to Freiman, we ought to value beings that exemplify "natural goodness" because doing so allows us to appreciate goodness in ourselves. Following O'Neill's analogy between friendship and environmental concern, Frieman draws attention to the way that true friends mirror one another's characters. That is, "[b]y observing another's excellent activity, we can see concretely what excellence consists in". And similarly, "by conceptualising a friend's flourishing life, we contemplate the nature and structure of a life well-lived".

However, the analogy with friendship and environmental concern might now have been pressed too far. For it is not clear how nonhumans could act as complete mirrors for human beings, given that nonhumans cannot possess ethical characters. For this reason, Freiman argues that appreciation of nonhuman entities can be based on recognition of the natural goodness or excellence that these entities manifest. And this appreciation (which Frieman calls 'goodwill toward nature') entails coming to view goodness in general as the performance of the characteristic excellence of each life-form. For, although the particular details of excellent activity differ among species, "an excellent human being and an excellent bird can both be said to exemplify natural goodness. In this way, all living organisms can model good action and thus present to us a mirror of our own goodness, which thereby enriches our lives". But if so, Freiman claims that "[w]e have reason to value the plurality of beings that can instantiate natural goodness generally, just as we have reason to value that plurality of human beings that can instantiate moral goodness in particular".

characterisation, since we can be "fairly certain that unexplored places (such as the ocean depths and the waters beneath the Antarctic icecap) and undiscovered species...are not constitutive of anyone’s flourishing". However, O'Neill had claimed that "for a large number, although not all, of individual living things and biological collectives, we should recognize and promote their flourishing as an end in itself". See O'Neill, Ecology, Policy, and Politics: Human Well-Being and the Natural World, 25.

39 Attfield, "Beyond Anthropocentrism," 36.
41 Ibid., 354.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 350.
44 Ibid., 351.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
This appeal to natural goodness as a common basis for environmental value bears a strong similarity to the Stoic imperative of ‘following nature’. For instance, Hierocles wrote that:

"Nature is a just teacher... each living thing lives in a way that follows its own natural arrangement. Indeed, so do all plants, in accordance with what is called living in their case; they don’t, however, make use of reasoning and counting, and selections from things investigated... and animals make use of appearances that draw them to what is familiar to them, and urges that get them going. To us, however, nature gave reason, which will itself in and with, or rather before all matters discern nature, so that, fixed on it as though on some brilliant stable goal it can select what is in agreement with it and organize all of our lives in due manner".47

It could then be that by appreciating the natural goodness of other living things, we appreciate how each of them exemplifies what is characteristic about being a member of that species. Thus, a strong, tall oak tree would be ‘in agreement with its nature’ because it had become an excellent member of its kind. Recognition of this should remind us that we, too, ought to follow our nature in order to become excellent members of our own kind. But even so, it is not clear what sort of value these other creatures ought to have for us. If we ought to value them because human beings can benefit by recognising how they exemplify their own distinctive natures, then this seems to be a merely instrumental claim for us. Moreover, if the value of living things is to ‘mirror’ natural goodness by enjoining us to follow our nature, it is hard to resist the thought that human beings will mirror this nature all the more readily. Given that a description of natural goodness in human beings is significantly more complex than a description of goodness in nonhumans, we presumably learn more about how to become good by turning our attention to human beings. But, however we respond to these problems, we still lack an argument for the claim that goodwill to nature ought to be an objective constituent of living well for human beings. Recall that this was our goal: to show why we should think that environmentally good behaviour was a necessary part of human flourishing.

III.

So far, we have not found a compelling reason to think that protecting or preserving the environment should be considered a necessary part of the good for human beings. However, it seems to me that this failure is the result of paying insufficient attention to the relationship between living well as a human being, and the ethical nature of human beings. The views explored above failed to explain what the notion of ‘nature’ actually entailed in this respect. Thus, it was vulnerable to the charge that there are many ways for humans to ‘naturally’ flourish, and that an appreciation of the environment was merely one among them. I will argue here that by exploring the notion of a shared human nature, we will be able to see why living a life that is sensitive to environmental concerns does look to us like an essential part of living well. Recall that the second thesis of eudaimonism invokes a species-specific perspective on goodness: human beings are claimed to require the virtues if they are to flourish as human beings, that is, in a characteristically human way. Enquiring into human nature thus requires us to ask what is characteristic about how human beings live, in general and as a species, before we decide what is characteristic about how excellent human beings live.

In an influential discussion of Aristotelian naturalism, John McDowell has argued that the concept of human nature is not extra-ethical: the relationship of the virtues to human good is not "founded on independent facts, underwritten by nature, about what it is for a human life to go well". McDowell notes that for Aristotle our nature is manifestly not the "disenchanted conception of nature yielded by modern science", i.e., a collection of facts about us that are graspable from a neutral point of view. Instead our nature is divisible into two distinctive kinds, a 'first nature', which broadly determines what we are as members of our species, and a 'second nature', which is the result of habituation, as well as reasoning and reflection on our characteristic ways of going on in the world.

We can see what second nature involves by considering the development of practical reason. As McDowell says, the virtues of character, which are acquired through moral education, habituation and reflection, are also the embodiment of good practical reasoning: "a practical intellect’s coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities". Our nature involves not only the sorts of facts that we could list from close observation of us as a species, but also the power of rational thought and reflection, which in its practical form is most evident in the sort of questioning we can subject ourselves and others to, asking for reasons why we should do x, or refrain from doing y. As McDowell puts it, "[n]ature, on this richer conception, is to some extent autonomous". Rather than an evaluatively neutral notion, human nature is a composite of considerations about what we are as a species. These considerations include most basically the inherent features of sociality and rationality, as well as the evaluative propensities that mark the development of our second nature. And this means that the way in which we think about human good or happiness will be conditioned by these considerations, which are not purely descriptive or factual, but are already conditioned by a developed ethical view of ourselves and one another. Given this picture of human nature, reflection on our beliefs, and the reasoning that supports our actions, must be a necessary feature of any well-lived human life. Indeed, as Julia Annas has remarked, when a person comes to reflect on his life, he will of necessity already have many commitments, beliefs, relationships, bonds of membership, and so on. While none of these features is beyond scrutiny, they remain the primary features out of which our second natures are formed.

We are now in a position to ask whether there are grounds for thinking that a good human life must also be an environmentally sensitive life. Given the picture outlined above, this requires us to ask about the reflective grounds we have for thinking that environmental concerns ought to be part of any such life, whatever else it contains. As we have seen, the answer we are seeking is not absolute in the sense of being beyond criticism and questioning, in light of further considerations. As McDowell puts it, our distinctive human reason is "inherently open to reflective questioning about the rational credentials of the way it sees things". This is because

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48 McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 149.
49 Ibid., 157. Although McDowell (p. 158) notes that it is possible, as neo-Humean philosophers do, to conceive of practical reasoning as a sort of reasoning that is "grounded in facts of disenchanted nature...And those facts can include such things as what animals of a particular species need in order to do well in the sort of life they naturally live".
50 Ibid., 167.
51 Ibid., 174-75.
52 See Annas, The Morality of Happiness, Ch. 1.
we can always go beyond what we are doing to ask whether a better way of going on is available to us. As Hursthouse puts it, “[o]ur concepts of ‘a good human being’ and ‘living well, as a human being’ are not “constrained by what biologically specialized members of our species actually, or, at the moment, typically, do’, for there is “room for the idea that we might be able to be and to live better”. 54 Because we can reflect on our reasons, we can question our prevailing ways of going on, and we can seek better ways of living. This is the essence of reflective rationality: the ability to reflect on the justifiability of our reasons, which includes not only recognising that we have reasons for behaving in the ways that we do, but also assessing whether our reasons are in fact good reasons.

I wish to claim that, in our age, reflection about a good human life must already be concerned with balancing human interests and demands against wider ecological considerations, such as how sustainable our current practices are, and what sorts of problems are likely to follow from them. If we consider what we now know about these things, then it is plausible to suggest that our picture of human nature has been deficient precisely in thinking about human beings, and hence the good for humans, in isolation from a wider, functioning ecology. While it is true that Plato speculates that the degradation of farmland in the hills around Athens was the result of the excessive felling of trees that once stood there, the ancients did not perceive the extent to which all of life, including human life, depends upon healthy, functioning ecosystems. 55 Nor could they have anticipated the enormous destructive power of industrial and post-industrial societies, with their insatiable demand for resources, their incredible power to transform nature, and the correspondingly immense destructive potential of such changes to the planet as a whole. Hursthouse recounts Aristotle’s belief in the impossibility of species extinction, since nature was at that time considered so vast that it seemed inconceivable for its integrity to be threatened by human behaviour. 56

It is no accident of history that Richard Routley’s ‘last man’ thought experiment was a product of the twentieth century, when the rapid and unprecedented expansion of industrialised nations had created threats to biodiversity that could never have been conceived of in previous eras. The famous “Blue Marble” photograph taken from space by the crew of Apollo 17 showed the exquisite isolation of Earth, as a lone bastion of life in an otherwise lifeless expanse of blackness. This image helped galvanise the early environmental movement, by emphasising both the precariousness and the fragility of our human existence on the planet. The work of figures like Rachel Carson in communicating the dangers of synthetic pesticide use and industrial pollution has also been integral to a growing awareness that human beings are fundamentally dependent on and interconnected with other living things and ecological processes. We are now far more aware of the possibility of limits to human expansion. For instance, according to the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment:

“...The changes that have been made to ecosystems have contributed to substantial net gains in human well-being and economic development, but these gains have been achieved at growing costs in the form of degradation of many ecosystem services, increased risks of nonlinear changes, and

54 Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 221-22.
55 See Plato, Critias, 110e5-111e1.
the exacerbation of poverty for some groups of people. These problems, unless addressed, will substantially diminish the benefits that future generations obtain from ecosystems.\textsuperscript{57}

By further degrading ecosystems in the pursuit of human well-being and economic development, humans are compromising many of Earth’s vital life-supporting systems. As developing nations have become more affluent via the growth of fossil-fuel intensive industrialised economies, pressure on ecosystems has increased further. According to the WWF, this has already taken us beyond the productive limits of the planet: since 2008 humans have consumed in one year what it takes ecosystems one and a half years to produce.\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, much of this consumption is wasted. To take food production as an example, according to the 2010 UN report \textit{Global Food Losses and Food Waste} around 1.3 billion tons of food (or one third of all food produced) is wasted globally each year.\textsuperscript{59} The authors note that much of this waste occurs in industrialised countries, where the principal causes are “consumer behaviour”, along with “a lack of coordination...in the supply chain”.\textsuperscript{60} Considering that the global human population is projected to hit nine billion by 2050, without substantial changes to global patterns of consumption, and in particular in the consumption of industrialised nations, these trends will significantly worsen if left unchecked.

The most pressing global problem created by human behaviour is of course climate change. As is now well-known, human behaviour is directly responsible for rising levels of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere, which have created a greenhouse effect that raised global average temperatures by 0.6°C over the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{61} Higher global average temperatures are very likely to further diminish the productive capacities of many of our already overstretched ecosystems, worsening a situation that is already very serious. Some vital ecosystems, such as coral reefs and rainforests, will be particularly vulnerable even to small rises in average temperature. And, depending upon the degree of change in temperatures, desertification of arable land and ocean acidification are likely to further threaten our ability to produce enough food for a growing population. Future generations now face the prospect of increased hardship, poverty, and competition for even scarcer resources.

What does all of this mean for how we think about what it is to live well, here and now? I claim that the eudaimonist presumption of reflecting on one’s life as a whole must take account of these considerations. As Annas says, “[t]he arguments and conclusions of ethical philosophy will be effective only with those who have come to them through worrying about real problems: recommendations as to how best to live will have force only with those who have wondered for themselves about how their lives are going”.\textsuperscript{62} Many people either already know about these

\textsuperscript{58}WWF/ZSL/GFN, \textit{Living Planet Report 2012} (London), 38-40.
\textsuperscript{60}Gustavsson et al. estimate that “per capita food waste by consumers in Europe and North-America is 95-115 kg/year, while this figure in Sub-Saharan Africa and South/Southeast Asia is only 6-11 kg/year”.\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., v.
\textsuperscript{62}Annas, \textit{The Morality of Happiness}, 29.
environmental challenges, or are rapidly finding out about them. And the natural response of a person with the right sort of second nature, that is, a person who has acquired a way of reflecting on her reasons and beliefs in something like the way described above, would be unease, discomfort, anger, and dismay. The ecological pressures associated with rampant human consumption, coupled with an explosion in human numbers across the Earth, and a corresponding rise in CO2 emissions, all result from our ways of living, especially those of us who live in wealthy nations. And it is recognition that, as a species, human beings are currently living in chaotic, short-sighted and dangerous ways, which drives environmentalists to agitate for change. But discomfort with how we are living, and what we are doing to the planet, is not limited merely to environmentalists. Indeed, many surveys of environmental attitudes suggest that this is something already felt by many people.\textsuperscript{63}

This point becomes even clearer if we contrast what living well might amount to for us here and now with someone who was considering what kind of life he ought to lead, but whose existence did not depend upon the ecosystems of a healthy planet. To use an example inspired by science fiction, imagine a person whose entire existence depended on the artificial atmosphere, gravitational field and ecosystems of a totally self-sufficient, self-sustaining space station. Imagine also that this person had been born there, along with all members of his community, and that the details of their previous existence on Earth were only remote historical curiosities. There is no reason to suppose that such a person would not be able to reflect on how he was living. But it seems clear that this reflection need not include any considerations of ecological dependence, since human life would in this case be supported solely by human beings and human technology. Now, since this person still interacts with other human beings, he would still need virtues such as justice, and courage if he is to flourish individually, and as a member of his community. However, it also seems clear that such a person could not possess any distinctly environmental virtues at all, given the total absence of anything remotely resembling the biology and ecology of present-day Earth. If this person reflected about how he ought to live, he would have no reason to take into account the sorts of ecological considerations which I have been discussing, because such considerations could not apply to him.

This example illustrates what is lacking in many discussions concerning the relation between human good and environmental virtue. That is, given the undeniable ecological dependence of human beings, and the wide range of environmental problems that threaten the potential for human happiness now and further into the future, I claim that we must begin the discussion about the relationship between human virtue and flourishing by also considering the particular biological and ecological facts about us as a species. Failure to do so encourages a false tension between human good and environmental virtue, as if environmentalist commitments and behaviours were some kind of unwanted imposition on human flourishing, and as if this notion were itself fully graspable from a neutral perspective. Instead, as I have argued, the actual relation between human nature and human flourishing is complex, and requires us to consider not only 'first-natural' facts about us as a species, but also the distinctive sort of reflective reasoning that we aim to develop as our second nature, which turned out to be internal to possessing the virtues.

Although this conclusion might appear to be an irreconcilable break with ancient eudaimonist thinking, it is not. For Annas makes clear that reflecting about one’s life as a whole is far from a conservative process of reinforcing our inherited biases and commitments. Annas writes:

“At the end of the day we find that our philosophical reflections have taken us some way from the intuitive suggestions of happiness... But this does not in itself show that we chose the wrong starting point. For we knew once we started to reflect that reflection would make us change and adjust our values and priorities. In fact the whole drive of ancient ethical theory is exactly this: to get us to revise our priorities... We would not, after all, have needed ethical reflection if things had been fine the way they were. We start on the process, characteristically, because on reflection we find that we are dissatisfied with our lives and the way they are going. An ethical theory that left all our intuitions about happiness in place could hardly do justice to the drive that started us reflecting to begin with.”

Any view of ethics that is influenced by Aristotle should be concerned with revising our existing priorities and ideas about human happiness and human good, in light of reflective reasoning about how we are living, and how we want to be living, as the rational, social creatures that we are.

Nonetheless, there is an undoubted novelty in this result. Aristotle’s understandable belief in the impossibility of species extinction appears incredible to us now, for we are so used to the idea that human activity can seriously impede the course of nature. Indeed, in this sense it is hard to over-emphasise the profound novelty of our current ethical landscape. In previous epochs, human beings were simply incapable of imagining a world in which human civilisation could threaten the viability of so many of Earth’s vital systems, or could destroy do much of the Earth’s biodiversity. The independence of nature was then something which we could not seriously question. Earlier civilisations viewed the natural world as mysterious and sacred no doubt in large part because it appeared to be infinite. But when we consider how modern human life is characterized more than ever before by a recognition of the fragility of Earth’s biological processes, as well as a recognition of the interconnectedness of life, it seems obvious that we should expect these considerations to feature in our reflections about how we ought to live.

We can therefore emphasise that our reflection on how we want to live, in an age of pervading environmental crisis, cannot plausibly be cut off from ecological considerations, given the kind of creature that we are, and the kind of world that we inhabit. We are not a species living in an artificial environment that depends only on our own action for its maintenance, and hence subject to no constraints save from those imposed on us by the limitations of our technological instruments. Instead, in reflecting on how we want to live now, we have good reason to conclude that human excellence and human flourishing cannot be separated from wider ecological considerations. And this conclusion, I have argued, must influence the resultant picture of what it is for a human being to live well, now, on a planet such as this.

References

64 Annas, The Morality of Happiness, 332.
Geach, P. T. "Good and Evil." *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956): 33 - 42.
Relativism, Ambiguity, and the Environmental Virtues: an Exploration of Care for Nature

Introduction

Many environmental writers and philosophers have recommended lists of environmental virtues in response to the looming environmental crisis. As a result, environmental ethics has been enriched by new virtue terms, such as ecological sensitivity or kinship with nature, and with new applications of older terms, such as benevolence or care. These terms suggest novel ways of living and interacting with nature. But how do we know which of these are genuine virtues? Although this question is important for any environmental philosopher, it is difficult to answer for two reasons. First, we might think of 'nature' in a variety of ways, each of which presupposes ethical beliefs about the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world. Second, our environmental discourse is not as familiar or fixed as it seems to be with other virtue concepts. In this chapter, I respond to both problems by considering the life of someone widely considered to be an environmental exemplar, US nature writer and conservationist Rachel Carson. I claim that Carson’s example shows us what it means to care for nature, and I suggest that care is one virtue concept that we have reason to recognise. An objection to this account is that our admiration of people like Carson depends on particular cultural beliefs and values which might conflict with those of other cultures. Against this objection, I argue that the threat of cultural variation need not shake our reflective confidence in appraisals of admirable people, or in our practice of recognising some ways of thinking about nature as excellent.

I.

How do we know what the environmental virtues are? In the previous two chapters, I argued that the environmental virtues should be seen as important in human life in the same way as more familiar virtues like courage or justice. But I did not say what the environmental virtues actually were, or what they might require of us. This question is important not only in the context of the present work, but in environmental ethics in general. Whatever one’s view about the importance of the virtues in ethics, any self-respecting environmental ethic shares the burden of explaining which environmental virtues there are, and what they require.1

A virtue is generally understood as a disposition to act well in a given sphere of human life. As Christine Swanton puts it, a virtue is “a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way”.2 For instance, courage pertains to certain aspects of human life and action, while justice pertains to others. This explains why we have no difficulty understanding an appeal to courage as the right appeal to make in one context, but not in others. In the same way, then, any account

1 This point has been made by many philosophers, and is directed against the claim that if we work out what is the right thing to do (in terms of universal rules or principles), we would then not need any practical dispositions to apply them correctly. In his introduction to the volume Environmental Virtue Ethics, Ronald Sandler echoes this point. See Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds., Environmental Virtue Ethics (Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

2 Christine Swanton, Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19-20. Swanton says that the field of virtue “consists of those items which are the sphere(s) of concern of the virtue, and to which the agent should respond in line with the virtue’s demands”.
of environmental virtue must adequately delineate the 'field' of each virtue, which would explain why that virtue is appropriate in some contexts but not others.

It is an assumption of this discussion that virtue terms are always embedded in the discourse and practice of human communities. But even if this is true, why should we focus on these concepts, and the apparently messy contexts in which they are found, rather than more abstract, general ethical notions, such as 'good', or 'right'? For a focus on more general notions could yield a secondary account of the virtues as, say, whatever traits enabled people to do the right thing most reliably or effectively, thus bypassing the need for the present discussion. Although I cannot argue this point directly here, I agree with Bernard Williams' claim that much of the philosophical focus on abstract terms such as good, right, and ought reflects a mistaken desire for theoretical simplicity and reduction. Indeed, Williams claims that these concerns impoverish our thinking by ignoring the ways in which we actually use ethical concepts. According to Williams, when philosophers actually look at the ethical concepts in use in human communities, they tend to find "thicker" or more specific ethical notions... such as treachery and promise and brutality and courage, which seem to express a union of fact and value"; that is, the application of these terms is "determined by what the world is like (for instance, by how someone has behaved), and yet, at the same time, their application usually involves a certain valuation of the situation, of persons or actions", and provides "reasons for action".

If we want to know, then, what the environmental virtues are, without already presupposing a view of ethics that determines at the outset what they must be, we need to focus on the virtue terms that we find in use in actual human communities. Indeed, when we focus on actual environmental discourse, there appears to be no shortage of potential virtues to choose from. Louke van Wensveen's review of environmentalist and conservationist literature identifies the quite amazing total of 189 environmental virtues and 174 environmental vices. However, as van Wensveen notes, it is highly unlikely that each one of these is a genuinely distinct disposition with its own clearly defined 'field'. But how can we find out which of these qualities are genuine virtues?

Philosophers have utilised a number of strategies to identify environmental virtues. One common strategy is to identify an already familiar virtue, such as compassion or benevolence, and then to suggest that its scope also includes aspects of nonhuman nature. The advantage of this strategy is that by exploring the environmental implications of recognisable virtues, it does not need to go much further than traditional discussions in justifying the virtues. However, this

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3 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985). As Williams (p. 127) says, "[m]oral philosophy is one area of philosophy in which the "linguistic turn", as it has been called, has not helped to give problems a more tractable shape... Its prevailing fault, in all its styles, is to impose on ethical life some immensely simple model, whether it be of the concepts that we actually use or moral rules by which we should be guided. One remedy to this persistent deformation might indeed have been to attend to the great diversity of things people do say about how they and other people live their lives".

4 Ibid., 129-30.


6 I follow Sandler's exposition of the different strategies for identifying environmental virtues in his introduction to *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. Sandler also points out that these strategies are often used together in the same argument.

7 For an example of this approach, see Geoffrey Frasz' "Benevolence as an Environmental Virtue," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. Ronald Sandler, and Cafaro, Philip (Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
strategy is unlikely to be fully adequate, since some of the central considerations in environmental ethics appear to be genuinely novel: the intuitions exposed by Richard Routley’s famous ‘last man’ thought experiment, or the ecological perspective encouraged by naturalists like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, seem to point us beyond the outlooks of past ages in favour of distinctly new ways of relating to the natural world. A second strategy is to identify those dispositions that both benefit the environment and human beings in some way. For instance, ‘enlightened self-interest’ views recommend actions, and hence the dispositions that encourage them, which promise to maximise pleasure among all sentient beings, or which maximise the satisfaction of preferences. However, these views run up against the intuition that it might be possible to act in an environmentally virtuous way even if no creature’s mental states are benefitted: for instance, by preserving a degraded ecosystem at the expense of a sentient, yet invasive species.8 A third strategy is to argue that genuine virtues are qualities that human beings require in order to flourish, because of what we are by nature. This position tries to link environmental virtues or attitudes to human well-being in the same way as virtues like courage or justice.9 However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, attempts to specify the contribution of environmental virtues to human good have been largely unsuccessful. A final strategy has been to explore the lives of environmental exemplars, people whose lives and actions suggest excellent traits of character in their interactions with the natural world.

However, if we accept the assumption that virtue concepts are embedded in community discourse and practice, then two distinct problems must be overcome. First, many accounts of the environmental virtues do not explore the normative assumptions implicit in how the concept of ‘nature’ is understood. Consequently, attempts to justify a list of virtues without also exploring cultural conceptions of nature leave themselves open to a threat of relativism, not only regarding which virtues there are, but also how these are to be understood. Second, many accounts do not acknowledge the unfamiliarity of environmental virtue terms when compared with interpersonal virtues such as courage or generosity, which have long occupied a central role in the moral education of most (if not all) human communities. As we shall see, these considerations present distinct problems for any account of the environmental virtues. In Section III, I argue that our lack of familiarity with the environmental virtue concepts justifies returning to the example of people who are conventionally thought to be environmentally virtuous. By looking at the example of US nature writer and activist Rachel Carson, I identify and explore the virtue of care for nature, and I argue that this is already a fairly familiar virtue concept. In Section IV, I explore the problem of relativism by asking whether cultural differences should threaten our reflective confidence in appraisals of environmentally admirable people.

II.

The most influential discussion of environmental virtue to date is from Ronald Sandler’s Character and Environment.10 According to Sandler, the principal environmental virtues are

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8 Philosophers attracted to such views would likely be unmoved by this consideration, and would reject my earlier point about the importance of looking at the ethical concepts we find embedded in human communities. I leave it to proponents of such views to develop convincing accounts of the environmental virtues.


10 Ronald L. Sandler, Character and Environment : A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). This is only one group of virtues that Sandler identifies, but
compassion, care for nature, nonmaleficence, ecological sensitivity, and restitutive (ecological) justice. This list seems intuitively acceptable, for the field of each of these virtues will include many of the considerations that environmental ethicists have tried to accommodate. For instance, compassion will apply to sentient creatures, care, nonmaleficence and sensitivity will presumably all be directed at any aspect of nature that has a good of its own, and restitution will be appropriate when an ecosystem is damaged without good reason.

However, despite its initial plausibility, lists of environmental virtues such as this fail to reflect the diversity of views in actual environmental discourse and practice. Virtue terms find their place in living human communities, and are reflected in the thick ethical discourse of such communities. Whatever the environmental virtues turn out to be, they too must be embedded in actual ethical discourse and community life. The environmental virtues, like environmental ethics generally, reflect the relationship between human beings and nonhuman nature, a relationship that results from engagement with the immediate surroundings of each community: its soil, its air, its native vegetation and native species, its coastline (or lack of coastline). When we consider how people actually think about the ethical relationship between humans and the nonhuman world, the diversity of perspectives that we find are not reflected in most discussions of environmental virtue. Within the concept of ‘nature’ itself we find a range of meanings that presuppose particular normative assumptions and beliefs. The question for such accounts of the virtues is: which beliefs are we to assume?

Consider the following: in one survey conducted with residents of the Cape Horn region of southern Chile, a number of distinct cultural perspectives on the meaning and significance of nature were identified. One was an embedded relationship with nature, which was prevalent among the indigenous Yahgan population. This view was attributed to people who did not recognise any clear separation between human beings and ecosystems, or any notion of wilderness. Another view was the cultivating relationship with nature, which was most common among the post-colonial population, for whom ‘cultivation’ meant the cultivation of exotic stock animals such as sheep, cattle and horses. Unlike those identified with the first paradigm, these people emphasised a form of stewardship based on private ownership of the land. Another view was the intellectual relationship with nature, which was attributed to people who viewed the region a source of appreciation rather than a place to earn a livelihood. Many who identified with this view had little personal connection to Cape Horn, and spoke about it in the idealised and abstract terms of biology and ecology. The most popular view surveyed was the aesthetic relationship with nature, which distinguished by a lack of emphasis on biological or ecological knowledge. Nonetheless, similarly with the intellectual perspective, respondents that identified with this view believed that there was a clear separation between their ordinary working and social spheres, and their recreational interaction with ‘wild’ nature.

it is distinctive because each virtue in this group is directed primarily at protecting some aspect of the environment.

11 Ibid., 82.

12 The literature on the significance of nature is vast, apparently bearing out Hume’s claim that there is no more ambiguous term in our language. For an overview, see J. Baird Callicott, and Nelson, Michael P., ed. The Great New Wilderness Debate (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Michael P. Nelson, and Callicott, J. Baird, ed. The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

13 Uta Berghöfer, Ricardo Rozzi, and Kurt Jax, "Local Versus Global Knowledge: Diverse Perspectives on Nature in the Cape Horn Biosphere Reserve," Environmental Ethics 30, no. 3 (2008). The authors identify a total of seven perspectives, not all of which I have mentioned here for reasons of marginality.
Now, it should be clear that several of these perspectives involve potentially conflicting ethical beliefs about nature. Although this study is limited to attitudes among inhabitants of Cape Horn, a large body of research suggests that wherever we enquire into the meaning of nature, we will find a similar variety of views. Without acknowledging the normativity of conceptions of nature, or the variety of perspectives that can be found in any sufficiently large and diverse society, accounts of the environmental virtues appear to invite concerns with cultural relativity, both among diverse groups within one society, and perhaps especially, between different societies. For it seems likely that different ethical and cultural perspectives on the human nature relationship will encourage different judgements about which qualities ought to be considered virtues, along with different judgements about the substance of these virtues. Take Sandler's supposed virtue of nonmaleficence: what this will mean depends firstly on what nature means, and on the sorts of considerations and behaviours that one has learnt to associate with harm, both generally and in the context of interacting with nature. For the point of not harming is not just recognising that something has a capacity to be harmed, but also that there is some sort of reason to recognise that this particular harm is something we should avoid. Consider, for instance, how we might think that removing an invasive species would be a good thing to do to preserve a local ecosystem. This suggests that harm, at least in the sense we are interested in, is an ethically inflected concept. While there remains a purely factual description of harm which we might phrase in entirely scientific concepts, this will not be the concept we are interested in here. But this concept of harm will be shaped by the way one conceives of the relationship between human beings and nonhuman nature.

Overly neat lists of the environmental virtues also obscure the point that we are less clear about what these qualities might involve than we are when considering our other virtue terms. Anyone can understand courage, justice, or generosity as qualities of certain people, and in most (if not all) human cultures some variant of these has had a central role in moral education. Of course, this makes it difficult to deny that qualities like courage and generosity are genuine virtues. But in most human cultures, the qualities currently being recommended as environmental virtues do not occupy anything like this role. Although this seems to be changing, such changes are understandably slow. The central concerns of environmental ethics reflect a significant novelty in our ethical thinking, which is no doubt prompted by the looming threat of environmental crisis, and the enormous destructive power of modern collective human behaviour.

These concerns were simply unthinkable in previous ages. Not so long ago the very idea that we should try to protect or preserve wild ecosystems, rather than simply look after existing areas of farmland, would have sounded eccentric to many people. The Enlightenment dogma of progress through industrial development, and the instrumental view of the whole of nature that often accompanied it, is well expressed by David Hume:

“When we recommend even an animal or a plant as useful and beneficial, we give it an applause and recommendation suited to its nature. As, on the other hand, reflection on the baneful influence of any of these inferior beings always inspires us with the sentiment of aversion. The eye is pleased

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15 As John O'Neill pointed out, identifying the good of something is not the same thing as providing a reason in favour of taking that good to have ethical significance for human beings. See "The Varieties of Intrinsic Value," The Monist 75, no. 2 (1992): 132.
with the prospect of corn-fields and loaded vine-yards; horses grazing, and flocks pasturing: but flies the view of briars and brambles, affording shelter to wolves and serpents”.

In his discussion of the novelty of environmental considerations in ethics, Anthony Weston suggested that our environmental values were at an “originary” stage. Weston’s point was that, given the novelty of environmental values, it would be a mistake to attempt to make these values the basis of a fully worked out theory of environmental ethics. Although it is likely that the discourse of environmental value has become more consistent since Weston’s contribution, the point still applies to how we think about environmental virtues: we are still at a stage where it is difficult to identify distinct environmental virtues in our discourse and practice. This is especially clear when putative environmental virtues are compared with interpersonal virtues such as courage or generosity. As such, the language and practice that should reflect environmental virtue is both evolving and dynamic, but not well-settled in anything like the way that it seems to be with familiar interpersonal virtues. But if so, it is unwise to insist on the formulation of lists of environmental virtues, where these are held to be more than tentative answers to an ongoing question about how we should interact with our environment. The result is not that we cannot talk about particular qualities that seem to us to be environmental virtues; we already do this, and we will continue to do so because environmental concepts, such as sustainability or biodiversity, have become part of our ethical vocabularies. But we should not try to put too firm a stamp on claims about environmental virtue.

III.

In response to this second difficulty, our best way forward seems to be to look in detail at the lives of people who we believe to be environmental exemplars, people whose attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, and entire lives seem excellent and admirable to us because of their engagement with nature. For this admiration also suggests, however inchoately or vaguely, the traits of character that we already seem to recognise as environmental virtues in practice. In what follows, I concentrate on someone who is often, and I believe rightly, recognised as environmentally exemplary, US writer and conservation activist Rachel Carson. As the author of four best-selling books, including *The Sea Around Us* and *The Edge of the Sea*, Carson’s wonder and love of nature reached a very wide audience in the US. Most famously, however, with the publication of *Silent Spring* Carson drew public attention to the use of synthetic insecticides in agriculture, which she exposed as a dangerous and ill-conceived method of controlling insect pest species. Indeed, many people date the beginning of the environmental movement to the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962. What, then, does Carson’s example show us about environmental virtue?

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18 Ibid., 151.
19 Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues : The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics*.
Philip Cafaro has identified several virtues that he believed to be central to the lives of the three great US environmental figures, Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson. According to Cafaro, Thoreau’s most important virtue was simplicity, which emphasised how living simply goes hand in hand with finding meaning and fulfilment in life; for Leopold, it was being able to recognise the excellence of other forms of life, which would change one’s perspective from being a “conqueror of the land community to a plain member and citizen of it”; and, according to Cafaro, Carson’s most important virtue was humility, which she both urged and displayed in the face of the extraordinary hubris of those who saw science as part of an ongoing conquest of nature. While it is beyond the scope of the present work to explore each of these figures in detail, Cafaro certainly seems right in suggesting that Carson considered humility to be an important environmental virtue. In *Silent Spring*, Carson wrote that those scientists and engineers who aimed to control nature through the use of synthetic pesticides and other chemicals lacked any “humility before the vast forces with which they tamper”. In contrast to such people, Carson seems to exemplify humility, for she not only saw that nature does not exist solely “for the convenience of man”, but also that nature was an endless source of wonder and fascination. However, the brevity of Cafaro’s discussion seems to miss out on other important attitudes and behaviours that are arguably as central to Carson’s enduring appeal as is her humility. In what follows, I will argue that Carson’s life and writing suggests another environmental virtue, which I will tentatively call ‘care for nature’. I will suggest that care is a natural description for much of what is expressed in Carson’s life and writing, and thus exemplifies how a caring person might think about and respond to nature.

In *Silent Spring*, Carson describes the effect of spraying synthetic pesticides (most notably DDT) on soil, on animals and birds, on underground waterways, on fish, and potentially on human beings. A particularly graphic example of the excesses of this program was from the town of Sheldon, Illinois. In 1954, The United States Department of Agriculture undertook a planned eradication of the invasive Japanese beetle in eastern Illinois, in which the related chemical dieldrin was sprayed over an area of 1,400 acres; by 1961, this area had grown to 131,000 acres. The resultant losses of wildlife and of domestic animals were tremendous. Carson relates the description of the effect of spraying on ground squirrels provided by some scientific observers at Sheldon. According to their description, the squirrels “exhibited a characteristic attitude in death. The back was bowed, and the forelegs with the toes of the feet tightly clenched were drawn close to the thorax... The head and neck were outstretched and the mouth often contained dirt, suggesting that the dying animal had been biting at the ground”. Carson immediately follows this by asking: “By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being?” This strategy is repeated throughout *Silent Spring*. Rather than simply listing a series of consequences from behind the neutral lens of scientific observation, Carson challenges her reader to reflect on the acceptability.

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24 Ibid.
25 As we saw, care for nature was part of Sandler’s list of virtues, but I claimed that his view was too divorced from language and practice, thus making it hard to understand what this quality might involve.
26 Carson, *Silent Spring ; Introduction by Lord Shackleton ; Preface by Sir Julian Huxley*, 82-83.
27 Ibid., 83.
of these practices. Carson asks: "[i]ncidents like the eastern Illinois spraying raise a question that is not only scientific but moral. The question is whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized".28

Carson’s writing drew public attention to the phenomenon of chemical biomagnification, explaining how pesticide concentration actually increased up the food chain, so that creatures such as raptors were being found dead with far higher concentrations of DDT in their bodies than had originally been sprayed over the fields. The indiscriminate use of pesticides highlighted by Carson was responsible for causing suffering to individual creatures, and also to local species populations. As Carson wrote, it “was a rare farm in the Sheldon area that was blessed by the presence of a cat after the war on beetles was begun”.29 The use of pesticides was devastating local populations of wild animals, in particular the birds which fed on sprayed insects and then died in tremendous numbers. Carson wished her readers to reflect on the need for such drastic action. For instance, she asks: "Who has decided - who has the right to decide - for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight?"30

Carson identified a major problem with the outlook of the scientists and engineers who enthusiastically advocated this pesticide spraying program: it was, she claimed, supported by a scientific outlook that was badly outmoded, in particular because of a profound ignorance of the principles of ecology, which emphasise that it is impossible to affect only one aspect of an ecosystem without also affecting others. As Carson says, "[t]he concepts and practices of applied entomology", from which scientific justifications for pesticide spraying programs came, were from "the Stone Age of science".31 But from Carson’s perspective it was not only that people who thought in this way were ecologically uninformed. They also failed to even consider the wild creatures they were harming, or the integrity of the ecosystems that were being disrupted. Implicit here is Carson’s own recognition that there was something missing from people who lacked these concerns. As Carson says, someone who thought that a world without insects would be the best possible world showed a lack of appreciation for nonhuman nature, as well as a lack of understanding of their own reliance on functioning ecosystems. Drawing attention to the thoughtlessness and recklessness with which these practices were conducted, Carson asks:

“All this has been risked - for what? Future historians may well be amazed by our distorted sense of proportion. How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind? Yet this is precisely what we have done. We have done it, moreover, for reasons that collapse the moment we examine them”.”32

Carson’s writing seems to show us a person who is not only humble in urging us to re-think the adoption of risky technological strategies to ‘manage’ nature, but also someone who cares deeply about living things and the ecosystems which they inhabit. And Carson thinks that we do

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28 Ibid., 82.
29 Ibid., 77.
30 Ibid., 105.
31 As Carson writes, "[i]t is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth". Ibid., 243.
32 Ibid., 8.
too: her portrayals of the deaths of birds and squirrels, for instance, are appeals to her reader that assume that we also find this to be disturbing, regrettable, and unnecessary.

If care is indeed the right virtue term to explain Carson’s response here, what does this involve?33 Nel Noddings argues that the essence of care is an appropriate receptivity to the reality of the other.34 Noddings claims that when we care about someone, we “have aroused in us the feeling, ‘I must do something.’ ... When I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other’s reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care”.35 Something like this description is recognisable in the behaviour of those who stop to assist injured wildlife: if pressed to explain why they do so, these people might give reasons such as “because I saw it was hurt, and wanted to help it”. In many places, it would be common to hear this kind of response. The caring person in this instance is sensitive to the distress of the injured animal at the side of the road, and feels motivated to do something about it.36

However, Noddings claims that we cannot really care for nonhumans any more than we can care for inanimate objects. Noddings writes: “we are, by virtue of our mutual humanity, already and perpetually in potential relation... In connection with animals, however, we may find it possible to refuse relation itself on the grounds of a species-specific impossibility of any form of reciprocity in caring”.37 It may seem, then, that the affective norms associated with caring for others do not stretch far enough to make the idea of caring for nature coherent. But there is actually little behind Noddings’ assertion that care can only apply to human beings. In the first place, caring does not always require reciprocity, unless we are to believe that newborn infants already care for their parents. Moreover, the way in which a concept is used surely tells us something about what it means. But there is nothing strained in describing someone like Carson as caring in her interactions with nature, or in describing the response of the person who assists injured wildlife as a caring response. Indeed, I think that care would be one of the most common ways in which to describe them. But if so, there is no purely conceptual obstacle to speaking about care for nature.

Moreover, contra Noddings, Carson’s writing suggests that caring for wild creatures, species or ecosystems does not imply the absence of emotion. It is also noteworthy that Carson’s work had the effect it did. Although many people had direct experience of the effects of pesticide spraying, many more who were not directly affected responded to the information presented in Silent Spring in similar ways to Carson herself, calling for pesticide spraying to be banned, and lamenting the unnecessary suffering of wild creatures. Indeed, Carson evidently also thought that we could not only care for wild animals, but also for plants, and the landscapes that these

33 I think we need to dispense with some initial linguistic ambiguities. In common usage, we seem to distinguish between caring for something, and caring about something in the following manner: I can say that I care about who wins the next election, while I can say that I care for my elderly relative. But these uses are not as sharply demarcated as they might appear. For instance, I can say that I care about my sisters’ wellbeing, but that I care for my car. What I am concerned to capture here are the distinctive norms of feeling and response that care in general, and care for nature in particular, is supposed to entail.
35 Ibid.
36 As John McDowell puts it, the virtuous person perceives the ethically salient aspects of the situation, and qua virtuous he is sensitive to the requirements that this perception imposes on him. See "Virtue and Reason," The Monist 62, no. 3 (1979): 331-33.
37 Caring : A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education ; with a New Preface, 86.
constitute. For instance, Carson laments what she calls the “tragic” destruction of areas of wild sage, and its replacement with grasslands for cattle grazing. Carson calls this an “unthinking bludgeoning of the landscape”, and adds that “[i]f ever an enterprise needed to be illuminated with a sense of history and meaning of the landscape, it is this”. It is thus not only the wild sage whose disappearance Carson laments, but the unique landscapes that their presence creates. Again, it seems perfectly natural to describe Carson’s response to the threatened sagebrush lands as a caring response. Moreover, this response is also affective: Carson is clearly upset by what is being done, and so, presumably, is her reader.

Thus far, I have sketched a potential environmental virtue, care for nature, which Carson appears to exemplify in her writing and her activism. I have also suggested that this is an appropriate and familiar virtue term to use to describe Carson’s response to nature, as well as the responses that many of us have to injured wildlife, threatened ecosystems, or even significant natural landscapes. But even if care is the right virtue term, we saw above that different conceptions of the human nature relationship appeared to threaten any substantive discussion concerning the requirements of the environmental virtues. In the next section, I ask whether this proposal is threatened by such differences.

IV.

As we have seen, a number of views about the significance of nature are likely to be found within any sufficiently large and diverse society, as well as between societies. Because of this, it is conceivable for people to disagree about whether someone’s way of responding to nature really is worthy of admiration. But this seems to invite a concern with relativistic conceptions of exemplars, and hence, of the virtues. For if the sorts of people held up as exemplary by members of one culture (or by members of one group within a single culture) differ too markedly from the sorts of people admired within another, we might have serious ethical disagreement about the features that make a person worthy of admiration.

In the first place, it is worth asking how we learn to identify some people as exemplars rather than others. For if there were no shared standards illuminating our practice, it is conceivable that judgements of exemplary people would rarely converge. Since this is not what we find, we should explore how the identification of exemplars functions in practice. In several works exploring the role of exemplars in ethics, Linda Zagzebski has argued that the identification of exemplars is central to moral practice: we “learn through narratives of both fictional and nonfictional persons that some people are admirable and worth imitating”. Zagzebski claims that our basic moral concepts “are anchored in exemplars of moral goodness, direct references to which are foundational”. Drawing an analogy with the theory of direct reference for natural kind terms, we say that “good persons are persons like that, just as gold is stuff like that”. Moreover, in the same way that we identify natural kind terms such as ‘gold’ or ‘water’ without knowing anything about the chemical properties of gold or water, we do not require a theory of

38 Carson, *Silent Spring* ; Introduction by Lord Shackleton ; Preface by Sir Julian Huxley, 52.
40 Ibid., 51.
41 Ibid.
According to Zagzebski, competent speakers can “successfully refer to good persons even when they associate the wrong descriptions with the term ‘good person.’” As with natural kinds like gold and water, people can succeed in referring to good persons as long as they, or at least some people in their community, can pick out exemplars.

However, although we can identify exemplars without much in the way of a theory of excellence or goodness, I doubt that we can do so without the use of any descriptive concepts, as Zagzebski claims. Our ability to identify exemplars seems to depend on a number of background theories, including folk theories about character types. For we do not simply refer to a person as ‘good’, without further qualification; instead, goodness is taken to be partly reflected in a person’s possession of particular qualities, such as honesty or generosity. But in order to recognise these qualities, we must obviously first have some grasp of them. Similarly, part of any process of learning to identify natural kinds such as gold and water involves overcoming the sort of thin resemblance identifications that might lead us to make errors. To overcome thin resemblances, we make use of direct references that themselves already involve some background descriptions. For instance, consider the content of the “that” in the following sentences: “the good person is not like that, gold is not like that”. Similarly, our ability to teach children about exemplars through direct reference depends upon a folk theory about character types. We might say, for instance: “someone like Rachel Carson doesn’t keep birds in cages!”

Nonetheless, it is hard to disagree that our ability to identify good people precedes serious reflection about the nature of their apparent goodness. Children readily admire certain people, but as they grow up they tend to see through these apparent exemplars. And this involves coming to see through the reasons for their earlier admiration. The result should be a more thoughtful and reflective view of the sorts of people that they consider admirable. For one’s identification of exemplars is surely educable in light of further thought and reflection.

But, even if radical disagreement about what good people are like is implausible across the board within the moral practice of a single culture, there is still room for significant disagreement. It is perhaps harder to see this with respect to someone like Carson, for, although some still accuse her of unfairly demonising the use of synthetic pesticides, she is now so widely admired that such accusations do not carry much weight. But what happens when disagreement is not marginal? Consider the example of the former Tasmanian politician and environmentalist Bob Brown: despite holding his Tasmanian Senate seat from 1996 until his retirement in 2012, Brown was a highly polarising figure throughout his political career. As a staunch environmentalist and opponent of Tasmania’s powerful logging corporations, Brown continues to be regarded as a hero by some and a menace by others. Thus, it seems as though one group would recognise Bob Brown as an environmental exemplar, while another would reject this view and would see in Brown some beliefs and traits of character that ought to be avoided. But if so, we might be worried that accounts of the virtues built around the examples of particular

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42 This point is supposed to be analogous to direct reference for natural kind terms. See Saul A. Kripke, Naming and Necessity, Revised and enlarged ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); Hilary Putnam, Mind, Language, and Reality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).


44 Zagzebski also claims that identifying exemplars "can fix the reference of the term 'good person' without the use of descriptive concepts". Ibid.

45 My thanks to Rosalind Hursthouse for this suggestion.
individuals will be prone to deep disagreements about value, both within one culture, and perhaps especially between different cultures.

In response to this, I want to claim that any general disagreement of this sort must raise further questions concerning the goodness of entire ways of living, since it is precisely these beliefs which are really at stake. In his discussion of relativism in ethics, Bernard Williams has suggested that it is a caricature to conceive of such a disagreement as a clear division between two homogeneous cultures. As Williams says, a “fully individuable culture is at best a rare thing. Cultures, subcultures, fragments of cultures, constantly meet one another and exchange and modify practices and attitudes”. Moreover, Williams argues that it is mistaken to think that, simply because certain social practices or beliefs belong to one culture rather than another, they would thereby be “guaranteed immunity to alien judgements and reactions”. If we recognise that conflicts of this sort are common even in seemingly homogeneous cultures, we cannot escape reflecting on what supports our beliefs, practices, and values. Indeed, Williams claims that “[t]he fact that people can and must react when they are confronted with another culture, and do so by applying their existing ethical notions... seems to show that the ethical thought of a given culture can always stretch beyond its boundaries”. However, Williams also points out the difference between confrontations in which another culture’s beliefs and practices constitute a “live option” for us, and confrontations where there is no way in which we could actually live the life that is being contrasted with our own. While the life of a Homeric hero is not a live option for us now, many confrontations in the modern world do seem to present us with live options to our own characteristic way of going on.

The question, then, is what we are to make of such a confrontation. For one thing, a real confrontation might shake our confidence in the correctness of our own beliefs. As Williams says, “[i]f we become conscious of ethical variation and of the kinds of explanation it may receive, it is incredible that this consciousness should just leave everything where it was and not affect our ethical thought itself. We can go on, no doubt, simply saying that we are right and everyone else is wrong... but if we have arrived at this stage of reflection, it seems a remarkably inadequate response”. Importantly, this kind of response would be inadequate not only from an ideal perspective, but from the perspective of an ordinary, rational person. That is, because we generally seek coherence among our beliefs, once genuine questions about the adequacy of our characteristic ways of going on have been raised, we cannot really be satisfied with merely asserting that we are right, at least without engaging in some form of self-deception.

In order to address this question, we will need to become clearer about the basis for environmental virtue attributions. I noted above our common practice of identifying examples of good people as people like that. But what does it mean in general to say that someone is a good person? As several philosophers have noted, what we mean by claiming that something is a good x, in most cases, is determined in part by what it is to be an x; for living things, this can be

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47 Ibid., 158.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 159.
50 Ibid., 160-62.
51 Ibid., 159-60.
readily understood in species-specific terms, as a good member of a particular species. But when it comes to human beings, an attribution of goodness appears to be quite different from these other uses. Indeed, when we say that someone is a good person, we already seem to be making an ethical claim. As Philippa Foot has argued, the kind of claim we are making here seems to be conceptually tied to what we choose to do, and the reasons we might give in support of our choices; that is, it is a claim describing our ‘rational will’. \(^{53}\) In evaluating the goodness of human beings, after we have separated those aspects of ourselves that are merely physical, we are left with our actions, emotions, and desires, as well as our ability to act on and revise our reasons. And it is the combination of these features that allow us to evaluate human beings as good people, that is, as ethically good or bad.

In the last chapter, I claimed that when we reflect properly on what a good human life might look like in an age of environmental crisis, we would not be able to ignore the ecological aspect of what it is to be a human being. Because, human beings, like all other species, are thoroughly dependent upon our surrounding ecosystems, we have good reason to suppose that a reflective picture of what it is to live a good human life could not be untouched by the alarming ecological and environmental consequences of our present behaviour. But if so, this already suggests that not all confrontations should shake the confidence we have in our current ethical beliefs and practices, including our practice of identifying exemplars.

Recall my earlier example of Bob Brown: it was claimed that a local community was roughly divided into two groups, one of which was opposed to the identification of Brown as an exemplar, while the other group was in favour. This kind of disagreement was thought to threaten the account of environmental virtue I have developed here, by casting doubt upon whether such judgements really could be more than just culturally specific. For, if one comprehensive view of human good did not include space for the admiration of environmentally excellent people, it would be hard to see why those holding such a view should recognise the traits of such people as virtues. But in making the claim that someone like Brown is not an exemplar, one group is claiming more generally that he is not an instance of a good person; a good person would not be someone like that, with characteristics, attitudes and behaviours like those. And now we come to an interesting dilemma for the defender of this claim: one would have to say either that Brown is not an exemplar, although others with distinctly excellent ways of responding to nature are; or one would have to say that responding excellently to nature is not a feature which makes one a good person.

Whatever the truth of the first claim turns out to be, it is clearly more plausible than the latter. \(^{54}\) As I have said, the first reason for this is that it is very hard to believe that environmental considerations are not partly constitutive of being a good person, in the face of a looming environmental crisis caused by human behaviour. To claim this, one would have to argue that it makes reflective sense to say that someone could not be labelled a paradigmatically good


\(^{54}\) I leave it open here whether Brown should be considered an exemplar. Interestingly, analogous cases suggest that polarised disagreement about the status of a figure at one time can often become unproblematic in future. For instance, while figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi are now considered exemplary by many, it is easy to forget that they were also once highly polarising figures. But it is striking how unremarkably their opponents have faded from our collective memories; and if we do remember the reasons for their opposition, this seems to be largely because these reasons stand discredited in our collective memories as potential ethical justifications.
person, that is, an exemplar, on account of behaviours and attitudes aimed at alleviating this crisis. But this is highly implausible, because we are considering a crisis which affects us as a species, which already seriously affects the world’s poorest people, and which will severely constrain the prospects of future generations of human beings to live recognisably decent human lives. Moreover, the environmental crisis affects all other species and ecosystems, many of which human beings have been attached to in the past, and which we have every reason to believe will continue to be important sources of value and enjoyment into the future. As David Wiggins has said, these things “form one part of the great framework for a life on earth in which human beings can find meaning”.55

The second consideration telling against such a claim is that although we find considerable variation in local understandings of nature, we find ideas about environmental excellence embedded in all reasonably reflective perspectives. For instance, in the study of environmental attitudes in Southern Chile discussed above, most views have the conceptual space to conceive of environmental exemplars in their ordinary ethical practices. The indigenous “embedded perspective”, while highlighting the interdependence of nature and human culture, also emphasised careful stewardship of the region. Thus, for someone who thinks like this, an environmental exemplar would be someone who generally showed how to do this in an excellent way. Indeed, given the lack of distinctions between nature and culture, it is likely that those associated with this perspective would not distinguish environmental exemplars from other kinds of exemplar. Or consider the “cultivating perspective” associated with descendents of colonial farmers: like the embedded perspective, for someone who thinks in this way, an exemplar would show excellence in his or her stewardship of the land being cultivated and its local surroundings. Or consider the “aesthetic perspective” attributed to those who enjoy spending time admiring nature: excellence here will be exemplified by those whose attention to nature is admirable and inspiring to others. And, similarly with the other views, the example of such a person will form part of the moral education of children learning about nature. This suggests that, even in a society with presumably diverse views about nature, not all views will be genuine candidates for admiration and imitation. Although almost anything may in practice be the subject of imitation, the fact that the subject matter for the moral education of children is limited to certain views rather than others already shows that we do not consider any view as equivalent to any other. Instead, we aim to instil the values of people who we consider to be excellent, and we do this because we think that they are excellent.

By way of contrast, consider what we would make of the radical opponent of environmental value. Consider a person who believes that nature is just a collection of resources for human beings to use as they see fit. While I doubt that many people actually think like this, presumably there are some who do. Indeed, we seem to have an example of people like this in the study cited above, which identified a small percentage of the people that thought of nature solely as a resource to serve their immediate ends.56 Although some of these people were professional fishermen whose daily activities brought them into contact with the unique scenery and plant and animal life in Cape Horn, they reported no appreciation of the pristine beauty of this place, nor any connection to it beyond the instrumental arrangement of earning a living. It is difficult

to resist the conclusion that such people are missing something. And this conclusion is reflected in the fact that people like this are not generally held up as exemplars by any group of people with reflectively compelling views.

Just as not every commonly accepted belief has a claim on reflective individuals, not every comprehensive perspective on what good people are like has a reflective claim on us. Moreover, consideration of what good people are like also tells us something about what we believe a good human life to involve. Among the other things that human beings need by nature, such as nourishment, shelter, and the company of others, we also need virtues of character; as Peter Geach put it, “men need virtues as bees need stings”.57 The usual argument in favour of traditional virtues such as justice, generosity, courage, and the like trades on this same point, namely, that we cannot imagine a human life going well without them. Those who object to this claim usually cite examples of apparently wicked people ‘doing well’, which is supposed to draw out a distinction between the ethical aspects of a person, and those ‘natural’ aspects that determine human wellbeing. However, as we saw earlier, this is not what we take the description ‘good person’ to mean in ordinary use. The special sense of goodness that is identified when goodness is attributed to a person, as opposed to an animal or an object, reflects the point that when we think about human goodness, we already presuppose an ethical perspective that involves the possession of certain virtues, and the application of human reason. Thus, in the same way that traditional virtues are recommended, it is plausible that some characteristic ways of responding to nature will be similarly admired and considered indispensible to a good human life.58

We should consider the contrast, by our own reflective standards, between someone like Rachel Carson, and the sorts of people that might lack her distinctive modes of responding to nature. If Carson’s humility, sense of wonder, and care for nature are not recognised as admirable by some people, that does not mean that these qualities are not really admirable; nor should this on its own shake our confidence that people like Carson really are admirable. As Aristotle says, the generous person will be considered stingy by wasteful people, while he will be thought wasteful by stingy people.59

Given the looming environmental crisis, it is plausible to think that the environmental virtues displayed by exemplars like Carson, Thoreau, and Leopold, remain very much ideals for most of us. But in this respect also they are not so different from more familiar virtues, such as charity or justice. Looking at the range of unnecessary and unjust suffering in the world, it would surely be impossible to conclude that most of us were already reasonably virtuous. Narratives of charity or justice continue to challenge us to better ourselves. And in the same way, the lives of environmental exemplars challenge our thinking about nature. Indeed, Carson suggests a way of looking at things that should start us down this path: “One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, “What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?”60

58 The affinity between this claim and the third way of justifying environmental virtue, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, should by now be clear.
References


Reconsidering Environmental Values

Introduction

Disputes about environmental value have typically been conceived as disagreements between an environmentalist, who believes that aspects of nature are intrinsically valuable, and a skeptic who does not. Many environmental philosophers mistakenly thought that existing theories of value could not capture the nature of this dispute because they could not account for environmental values. However, I argue that this critique neither justifies nor requires the abandonment of traditional value theory. Second, philosophers mistakenly believed that environmental values (and values in general) were beyond the reach of rational discourse and persuasion. As a result, the sort of disagreement that environmental philosophers wanted to address was misconceived as a battle between opposing worldviews, adoption of which did not rely upon an exchange of reasons, but upon a kind of non-rational commitment. In this chapter, I suggest that an expanded conception of human value can do justice to attributions of environmental value without making value discourse dependent upon the irrational adoption of a worldview.

I.

Disputes about environmental value have typically been conceived as disagreements between an environmentalist, who believes that aspects of nature are intrinsically valuable, and a skeptic who does not. For example, those opposed to a development might point to harmful effects on native species, loss of wilderness areas, or pollution, while those in favour might point to an increased supply of residential land, or greater employment opportunities. Many environmental philosophers would claim that the developer has only ‘anthropocentric’ (i.e., human-centred) values, while the environmentalist has ‘nonanthropocentric’ values, environmental values that have little or nothing to do with human concerns. Early environmental philosophies thus aimed to provide convincing arguments for intrinsic value in nature which could be used in actual disputes against supposedly anthropocentric developers or policy-makers. In this vein, philosophers defended the value of many aspects of the environment, such as sentient creatures, goal-directed living things, non-living collectives, ecosystems, and even the entire biosphere.

However, philosophical discussions largely failed to account for the nature of the dispute between environmentalists and their opponents. In my view, this is because philosophers have tacitly relied upon two extremely problematic assumptions. Influenced by critiques of

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1 This framing is explicit in many debates about value in environmental ethics, but is perhaps most obvious in exchanges between environmental pragmatists and nonanthropocentric philosophers. See, for example, Andrew Light and Eric Katz, eds., Environmental Pragmatism (London: Routledge, 1996).
anthropocentrism, many philosophers thought that existing theories of value could not capture environmental values. Coupled with additional assumptions about the gulf between factual and evaluative properties, this raised seemingly intractable problems for environmental value theory. However, I argue that the critique of anthropocentrism neither justifies nor requires the abandonment of traditional value theory. Second, environmental values, along with all other values, have typically been considered beyond the reach of rational discussion. As a result, the sort of disagreement that environmental philosophers wanted to address was seen as a battle between opposing worldviews, adoption of which did not rely upon an exchange of reasons, but upon a kind of non-rational commitment. In this chapter, I argue that neither of these assumptions is necessary. Instead, I will suggest that an expanded conception of human value can do justice to attributions of environmental value without making value discourse dependent upon the irrational adoption of a worldview.

II.

In the early years of environmental ethics, environmental value theory was almost synonymous with the critique of anthropocentrism. A narrow set of ‘human-centred’ values were apparently responsible for the environmental crises increasingly experienced by modern human societies, including the chemical pollution of our surroundings, the loss of wilderness areas, and rates of species extinction unparalleled since the last Ice Age. Societies predicated upon narrowly self-interested values stood accused of destroying nature, and even of threatening the future of our own species. It is hard to overstate the enduring influence of this analysis. Indeed, the term ‘anthropocentrism’ continues to be used by philosophers, as well as writers in the environmental humanities and social sciences as a catch-all derogative for anti-environmentalist ideas or proposals.

However, before we can explore the nature of this critique, we need to understand the wider philosophical context out of which nonanthropocentric philosophy developed. This is because early environmental philosophies were influenced by long-running debates in twentieth century meta-ethics about the nature and reality of values. One of the primary topics of analysis here was how to explain, and ultimately justify our experience of value in a way that was compatible with the view of nature provided by the natural sciences. That is, recognising the importance of art, the beauty of nature, or the worth of philosophy seems to us to involve coming to see things correctly, or properly. But was value experience capable of being true or false? And how could we actually know?

To some, these questions seemed to ask for an external grounding for value. That is, by correctly perceiving something as valuable, we thus perceive something that is really there in the world. Because this way of thinking invites comparisons with scientific knowledge, skeptics such as J. L. Mackie claimed that values could not really be part of ‘the fabric of the world’. Unlike the objective properties discovered by science, Mackie suggested that values were more like secondary properties, such as colours, which relied upon our human sensibilities for their

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4 This literature is vast. For a clear discussion of the main points of dispute, and their significance, see Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003).
existence, and hence were not ‘real’ features of the world.6 But Mackie claimed that values are even less real than colours, whose existence could at least be accounted for in purely physical terms. In contrast, values seemed to be expressions of subjective attitudes or preferences, although we mistakenly take them to be correct responses to the world.7 Against this challenge, the defender of objective values apparently had to explain not only how values could be properly attributed to aspects of the world, but also what kind of relation held between the world according to natural science, and moral values, which are apparently normative construals of this same world. And, just beneath the surface here is Hume’s famous argument for the impossibility of reaching conclusions about what we should do from purely descriptive premises about what is the case.8

Against this philosophical backdrop, nonanthropocentric philosophers argued that there was something missing from mainstream value theory. Richard Routley’s famous ‘Last Man’ experiment asked whether the last human being left on Earth would be permitted to destroy the planet when he died, although no future human interests could be harmed as a result.9 The strong negative response to this example apparently exposed the central intuition of nonanthropocentrism: that there must be more to the realm of value than human interests. But it remained to be seen how this claim could be accounted for in a skeptical philosophical climate which affirmed a strong distinction between a realm of facts discoverable by empirical science, and a realm of values whose existence now looked mysterious.

In response, Holmes Rolston’s influential nonanthropocentric theory tried to maintain that moral values are real because they are literally the properties of living things discoverable by the natural sciences.10 But this attempt to justify a naturalistic theory of value flounders because by collapsing values and scientifically discoverable properties into the same things, we strip values of their normativity. For if facts of this sort just are moral values, we forfeit any plausible explanation for why a person ought to consider some facts as ethically salient as opposed to some others, such as the atomic mass of hydrogen, or the time of day.11 Indeed, Rolston’s theory is striking because it attempted to ground the nonanthropocentric outlook directly in features of the natural world. But, although it must now be regarded as a failure even on its own terms, others have fared little better in explaining the relation between features of nature and attributions of value.

J. Baird Callicott’s anti-realist theory emphasised the other side of the distinction between reality and value.12 For Callicott, values are ‘projected’ by human sensibility onto an otherwise

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6 Mackie follows Locke’s distinction between primary qualities such as atomic weight, or spin, on the one hand, and secondary qualities such as colour. In Locke’s time, these would have been Newtonian properties like mass, extension, and form.
7 Mackie’s position is thus an ‘error theory’ of value.
10 Rolston III, Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World.
value-free world. But Callicott’s theory now seems to have been an especially naive form of projectivism, and as such it faces a number of well-known problems, such as how we are supposed to be able, on the one hand, to recognise that our values are ‘unreal’ projections onto a value-free world, while at the same time seriously considering these projections as authoritative. Worse, since Callicott claims that our evaluative responses are just what we happen to already value, it seems impossible for any value attributions to be mistaken. Not only is this implausible, it leaves completely mysterious why certain features of nature merit value-status but others do not. Callicott’s attempt to resolve this fundamental problem appealed to an even less plausible evolutionarily determined ‘standard’ for value. But even if this were accepted, questions about when our values are appropriate would still remain.

Crucially, though, neither of these theories actually shows why a fundamental break with mainstream value theory is actually necessary. Recall that this was the apparent implication of Routley’s ‘Last Man’: that there had to be more to the realm of value than mere human interests or concerns. But this example actually shows far less than nonanthropocenrist philosophers typically believe, because it tacitly relies upon a smuggled human perspective on value for its intelligibility. It is unavoidably us, the readers, i.e., actual human beings with evaluative outlooks on reality, who interpret the significance of the ‘Last Man’. But this means that there is no reason to suppose that environmental values are external to human interests or concerns; instead, it is our already shaped human interest that generates the apparent (but now absurd) conclusion that human interests are irrelevant to environmental value attributions. As several philosophers have pointed out, it is ultimately an illusion of modern theoretical rationality that we can access a realm of value sub specie aeternitatis; whatever we attempt this, we are ultimately unable to escape presupposing an already shaped human practical rationality.

This presupposed human evaluative perspective also shows up at crucial points in both Rolston’s and Callicott’s theories. Rolston’s attempt to identify value with natural properties cannot escape relying on a mysterious, but nonetheless human faculty of intuition which ‘detects’ values in natural properties. Without this, there would be simply the realm of facts discoverable by the empirical sciences. And Callicott’s nonanthropocenritic theory of value is grounded in a standardised human evaluative perspective, which confers value onto the value-free natural world. Thus, neither theory can ultimately ground the intuition of nonanthropocentric value except via anthropocentric categories of intelligibility. Similarly, Paul Taylor’s neo-Kantian theory of environmental value identifies all living things as bearers of moral worth simply because they are alive. Although this appears to ground value in something beyond human perspectives, Taylor must ultimately rely upon a human attitude, the ‘biocentric outlook’, to make these values intelligible.

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13 I understand ‘projectivism’ here to be a form of emotivism.
14 For this point, see Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 197. For a discussion of further problems associated with emotivist theories, including projectivism, see Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Ch. 3.
16 See Habermas; Williams 1985
18 Ibid., 44.
Indeed, part of the problem in examining what the critique of anthropocentrism actually reveals is that the details change in the hands of different philosophers. Thomas Hill has suggested that ‘anthropocentrism’ has meant each of the following:

i.) that “[e]verything in nature except human beings exists solely for the material benefit of human beings”;  

ii.) that “[e]verything in nature except human beings exists solely for the benefit of human beings”, where ‘benefits’ also include spiritual and aesthetic benefits;  

iii.) that “[a]ll valid concerns about the natural environment derive ultimately from human rights and duties to respect human interests”;  

iv.) that intrinsically valuing nonhuman animals, wilderness, and ecosystems benefits us as human beings;  

v.) that “[a]ll moral obligations and duties, virtues and vices, blameworthiness and praiseworthiness are, strictly and literally, attributed only to human beings (and other ‘rational’ beings)”;  

vi.) that we must justify attributions of intrinsic value in nature by means of naturalistic facts about what is valued, as well as “human reason, sensibility, experience, dialogue, and reflection”;  

vii.) that moral justification does not depend on our perception of either “values that exist as facts in nature”, or on perceiving “nonnatural ‘intrinsic values’”.¹⁹

Plausibly enough, Hill suggests that only claims (i.), (ii.), and (iii.) seem to be even prima facie problematic. It is hard to see why (iv.) should be controversial at all, and while (v.) is a common presupposition in moral philosophy, it contains nothing in the way of substantive claims about the proper objects of moral concern. It does not, for instance, license the assumption that we are only capable of morally significant action when that action is directed at human beings or their interests. Moreover, when we consider what is supposedly involved in ‘substantive’ anthropocentrism, which seems to be captured by the conjunction of theses (i.) and (ii.), it is no longer clear that anyone who assents to such a view is even worth arguing with. Consider the apparently anthropocentric virtue of compassion: a compassionate person sees certain features, such as the pain or suffering of another person, as a reason for responding in a particular way, for instance by attempting to relieve it. But notice that anyone who thinks that compassion is a virtue is also committed to recognising the suffering of other creatures that can experience pain and suffering. As Rosalind Hursthouse has argued, it is now “obvious to many of us that a great deal of gratuitous suffering is involved in our use of some of the other animals for food and experimental purposes”.²⁰ But as Hursthouse points out, as soon as we recognise this, “the ordinary usage of ‘cruel’ and ‘compassionate’ latches on to it quite unproblematically”.²¹ So long as we think that we can be cruel to animals, we must also think that compassion applies to them. But this means that those who recognise compassion as a virtue are thereby already committed to responding in a distinctive fashion to the suffering of both humans and nonhumans.

Only someone who was prepared to deny the possibility of cruelty to animals could actually be an anthropocentrist in the most obviously objectionable sense of this term. Of course, it is hard

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²¹ Ibid.
to find any philosophical defenders of such a crude position. Thus, not only have supposedly
nonanthropocentric philosophers ultimately relied upon anthropocentric foundations, but the
radical critique of anthropocentrism now looks to apply only to a particularly implausible
version of this position which even mainstream ‘anthropocentric’ philosophers would hesitate
to defend.

III.
The second problematic assumption I want to address is the conviction that values are not
ultimately open to rational discussion or criticism. As with the belief in the sharp separation of
the factual and evaluative realms, this idea seems to be the product of empiricistic tendencies to
analyse all meaningful discourse according to the standards of natural science. Values, and
indeed entire evaluative perspectives (or ‘worldviews’), could no longer be grounded in a
naturalistic picture of reality. Instead, they are ‘adopted’ in a way strikingly reminiscent of
religious faith, and can only be justified by reason once this irrational commitment has taken
place. Jürgen Habermas is perhaps the clearest critic of this tendency in modern thought. For
instance, in *Theory and Practice*, Habermas writes:

“Reason... is assigned to the level of subjective consciousness, whether as the capacity for empirical
verification of hypotheses, for historical understanding, or for pragmatic control of behaviour. At
the same time, interest and inclination are banished from the court of knowledge as subjective
factors. The spontaneity of hope, the act of taking a position, the experience of relevance or
indifference, and above all, the response to suffering and oppression, the desire for adult autonomy,
the will to emancipation, and the happiness of discovery of one’s identity – all these are dismissed
for all time from the obligating interest of reason. A disinfected reason is purged of all moments of
enlightened volition; external to itself, it has externalized – alienated – its own life”.

Habermas, along with other critical theorists, claims that the separation of reason from the
realm of human practice is a central doctrine of modernity, albeit one buried within the
methodology of technical manipulation and control. This doctrine appears in the distinction
between the ‘hard sciences’, such as physics, and the ‘soft sciences’ of psychology and sociology.
And it also appears in much analytic philosophy, wherever practical questions about human life
and society are reduced to decision-theoretic or scientistic investigations into the most efficient
operationalisation of behavioural norms. In all this, manipulation and control is emphasised,
while rational persuasion about the norms or values themselves is effectively abandoned.

Unsurprisingly, this same tendency is present in nonanthropocentric philosophy. As we have
seen, in both Rolston’s and Callicott’s theories, reason is reduced to explaining the
supervenience of values on natural properties, but cannot be invoked to provide support for an
attribution of value. Similarly, Taylor blithely assumes that anyone with “a developed capacity
for reality awareness” will adopt his proffered evaluative outlook. But as Hursthouse has
pointed out, Taylor’s prescription would involve a complete evaluative change in the individual
that is more akin to religious conversion than rational persuasion. In this respect, Deep

22 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice ; Translated [from the German] by John Viertel* (London:
Heinemann, 1974), 262-63.
24 Rosalind Hursthouse, ”Environmental Virtue Ethics,” in *Working Virtue : Virtue Ethics and
2007), 163-64.
Ecology is perhaps the most honest nonanthropocentric philosophy, since it makes the requirement for a far-reaching evaluative change of outlook a pre-requisite for appreciating environmental values.  

This irrationalism about value is still present in more promising recent theories of environmental value. Consider Katie McShane’s ‘neosentimentalist’ theory. This is a variant of the ‘fitting attitude’ approach to value, which claims that there is a relation of fittingness between our ‘thick’ evaluative attitudes and their objects. As a cognitive approach to value theory, there would seem to be a central place for rationality in explaining the appropriateness of value attributions. However, as we shall see, McShane’s take on fitting attitude theory ultimately makes reason an external feature which can merely explain but not persuade. 

Like other ‘fitting attitude’ theorists, McShane’s view goes beyond the oversimplification of value experience found in some discussions, where value is a kind of generic appreciation or recognition of good states of affairs or objects. As McShane points out, “people rarely if ever simply value a thing; rather, they value it in a particular way: they admire it, or respect it, or are in awe of it, and so on”. As McShane notes, this diversity in our practice of valuing makes it important to know which object merits which attitudes, because “different attitudes bring with them different norms of feeling and action”. For instance, consider the difference between objects that merit reverence, and objects that merit love: a proper object of reverence “suggests norms involving a somewhat distanced, appreciative, and non-interfering role for the valuer”, while a proper object of love “suggests norms involving a more active role: taking steps to nurture, protect, or otherwise benefit the beloved”. However, the question for McShane is why these norms should be considered appropriate.

McShane’s first attempt to answer this appears to strengthen the rational credentials of value attributions. For McShane claims that “in order to determine whether a sentiment is warranted, we should ask whether sound reasons can be given in justification of it”. Thus, if we want to object to an attribution of value, we need to show that the person who represents it as valuable in that way actually has “no positive reason for thinking that the object does merit the sentiment”. However, McShane does not ultimately say what makes a reason count as sound. We can perhaps all agree that one ought to have sound reasons for thinking that a particular attitude or sentiment is merited in response to something without being able to agree on what counts as a sound reason in this context.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 10-11.
31 Ibid., 12.
32 Ibid., 12, emphasis original.
Perhaps recognising the inadequacy of this first suggestion, McShane proposes an alternate ‘error-finding’ procedure, according to which we consider a sentiment merited so long as no errors are evident when an attribution of value is made. But this proposal transparently directs us towards external standards of verification, abandoning the thought that justifying reasons might be found for values. Thus, McShane claims that we can affirm a value attribution by finding it to be absent of factual errors about the valued object. For instance, a belief in the rarity of something as a basis for a certain kind of response would be unjustified if it turned out that the object in question was common.33

Alternately, and more importantly, we might make an attribution error in which the qualities that our sentiments imply to be there in their objects turn out to be absent. According to McShane, for a sentiment to be considered appropriate, “the objects in question must really have these qualities”.34 Thus, McShane claims that “things that are awesome must be great in some way; if there is no greatness about a thing, then it is not an appropriate object of awe. Likewise, things that are fearsome must pose or be capable of posing a threat; if something cannot pose any threat, it is not an appropriate object of fear”.35 If we do not detect any errors, then McShane claims that “we have reason to believe the sentiment is merited; insofar as there actually aren’t any errors, the sentiment is merited”.36 But, given that the qualities in question here must already be phenomenal, and hence can be open to dispute from others who see things differently, this proposal seems to rely once again on an appeal to external verification.

One form of verification, but one that is plainly external to the rationality of value, could come via confirmation in surveys of environmental attitudes. For instance, one could claim that an attribution of value is justified when most people agree that the object in question really possesses the value quality attributed to it. But this is no more an argument for the reality of environmental value than what is already provided by research into environmental attitudes.37 It is of course not rationally persuasive to claim that something is valuable simply because most people think it is. Lurking in the background here is an implied threat of value incommensurability: if no rational criteria apply to value discourse, then a disagreement about value seems to reduce to a non-cognitive predicament of disagreement about brute likings that cannot be resolved.38

IV.

Thus far, I have argued that the critique of anthropocentrism did not justify or require radical theoretical departures from mainstream value theory. Those persuaded by the critique of anthropocentrism correctly interpreted the dispute between environmentalists and their opponents as a disagreement about value. However, the nature of value itself was understood in such a way that this disagreement could not really be subject to rational criticism. Instead,

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33 Ibid., 12. Another sort of error McShane identifies would result from a failure to recognise that our sentiments impose consistency requirements on us. For instance, McShane claims that “the sentiment of fascination is prima facie inconsistent with the sentiment of indifference”.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 12, emphasis original.

37 I will return to this point in the next section, where I discuss what is important about a view’s being widely shared.

38 Of course, there are well-known objections to such a construal given that disagreements about value ordinarily appear to us to be (at least partly) cognitive, and thus to be truth-apt.
‘conversion’ to an environmentalist worldview, the rationality of which could only be shown afterwards, seemed to be the unavoidable prescription. A more recent alternative, but one still assuming the irrationality of value attributions, attempted an external verification of environmental values according to ‘neutral’ standards, such as internal coherence, factual support, or confirmation in public opinion. But even here, the disagreement between environmentalists and their opponents does not appear to be rationally tractable.

I want to offer an alternative framing of this dispute, within which values are indeed subject to rational criticism, exemplified in the exchange of reasons, but also in our estimation of the character of those asserting value claims in practice. Before I can develop this, however, let us return to the result of our discussion of anthropocentrism. I argued that environmental critiques could not ultimately abandon anthropocentrism. The price of making our value concepts intelligible was the adoption of anthropocentric categories of intelligibility at some level. What this meant, I claimed, was that we did not need to abandon mainstream value theory in order to accommodate environmental values. Given the absence of such a conceptual obstacle, I propose analysing values according to a humanist perspective. On this view, all values are essentially human values, although the content of our values is not limited in scope to narrow human interests or concerns. Instead, this content is to be determined by rational criticism and reflection. And reflection here is not limited to making judgements about objects or states of affairs in isolation, but includes consideration of the goodness of entire ways of living.

Since the prospects of this approach are likely best shown in action, let us return to the dialectical context of dispute between the environmentalist and his opponent. The environmentalist affirms the value of some aspect of nature, while his opponent denies this attribution of value. How should the environmentalist try to convince his opponent? In response to someone skeptical about the value of deserts, Dale Jamieson offers the following suggestion:

"Many people think of deserts as horrible places that are not worth protecting. I disagree. I value deserts intrinsically and think you should too. How do I proceed? One thing I might do is take you camping with me. We might see the desert’s nocturnal inhabitants, the plants that have adapted to these conditions, the shifting colours of the landscape as the day wears on, and the rising of the moon on the stark features of the desert. Together we might experience the feel of the desert wind, hear the silence of the desert, and sense its solitude. You may become interested in how it is that this place was formed, what sustains it, how its plants and animals make a living. As you learn more about the desert, you may come to see it differently and to value it more".

While there is no guarantee that the skeptic will be convinced by Jamieson’s response, there are certainly some constraints on how a skeptic might reasonably object. Imagine one sort of skeptic who accompanied Jamieson, but who spent the entire time distractedly playing with her smartphone (let’s presume he has network coverage). Do we have good reasons to take her denial of value seriously? Consider an analogous case of aesthetic judgement: imagine a person who has no interest in art, and no knowledge about its history, but who finds herself, against her better judgement perhaps, walking through the Louvre. She spends the entire time reading the

newspaper and complaining about all of the people. As a result, she does not really engage with any of the artworks. If this person then claimed not to understand why others valued these artworks so highly, I think we would have good grounds to dismiss the complaint.

What makes this response deficient is surely the complete failure to engage with any of the images on the walls in front of her. If she looks at them at all, she fails to be even the least bit interested in what is there to be experienced. As such, the ‘experience’ of these artworks is so superficial that we can clearly distinguish it from the experience of another person who bothers to look at what he is seeing, to read the descriptions of the pieces, and to form some sort of judgement about particular artists or artistic periods. In a similar vein, Ronald Hepburn suggests that we can talk about whether an appreciation of nature is appropriate by considering the seriousness of the experience, and hence of the mental state of the observer. Hepburn makes a distinction between ‘truer’ and more ‘serious’ experiences of nature, and more ‘superficial’ and ‘trivial’ ones, and argues that the former are more appropriate, analogously with more serious modes of appreciation of art. Thus, there is a reason to think that deeper and more serious experiences of nature tend to yield more appropriate responses in the same way that a deeper or more serious engagement with art yields a better grasp of its value.

Of course, this is not the only way in which a value claim can be unreasonable. In addition, attributions of value must draw upon widely shared standards in order to be intelligible. We learn to make attributions of value in a social context that is built upon a great deal of agreement about what is of value. As Philippa Foot argued, in coming to learn to describe something as good, we make use of common criteria for judging something as good which depend upon the characteristic purpose to which the word is applied. Foot puts the point thus:

“That most men must have a reason to choose good pens depends on the purposes which we take for granted in talking about good and bad pens at all: we cannot suppose that the standard case is that of wanting pens for the creation of blots, or undecipherable marks without dissociating pens from writing, and changing the concept pen. The necessary connexion lies here, and not in some convention about what the individual speaker must be ready to choose if he uses the word ‘good’.”

Because our judgements generally presuppose certain criteria which emerge from the standard or typical uses of our evaluative words and concepts, evaluations differ from widely shared standards at the risk of unintelligibility. For instance, when we judge someone a good tenor, the combination of the evaluative term ‘good’ with the role of tenor produces criteria of goodness in the same way as a functional word such as ‘knife’. So, what can count as being a good tenor is not something which we can simply invent depending upon our own wishes; any attempt to do

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42 Ibid., 12.
43 Several other leading aestheticians have echoed this claim. For instance, see Allen Carlson, "Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Requirements of Environmentalism," Environmental Values 19, no. 3 (2010); Yuriko Saito, "Future Directions for Environmental Aesthetics," ibid.; Yrjö Sepänmaa, "From Theoretical to Applied Environmental Aesthetics: Academic Aesthetics Meets Real-World Demands," ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 49-50.
so would simply show that we are not really sure about the meaning of the word ‘tenor’. Indeed, Foot points out how domain-specific excellences also inform our judgements. In the case of aesthetic judgements, Foot claims that we typically expect their objects “to interest us profoundly, and this must have something to do with the fact that we are not allowed to give as support for a judgement of aesthetic merit the mere fact that a book passes the time easily, or makes us cry, or cheers us up. That when we speak about a good book or picture we do very often mean to judge it as a work of art depends on the role which these things have”.47

Attributions of value generally presuppose certain criteria which emerge from the standard or typical uses of our evaluative words and concepts. As such, we cannot apply value terms in totally idiosyncratic ways. Instead, we apply value terms in the context of community use, a use which already presumes a great deal of agreement. Indeed, evaluative language is only correctly used by a person who has undergone a training in the use of evaluative concepts as part of a community. As Wittgenstein says, the learning of language is a kind of “training” in the correct use of concepts, which itself presupposes the backdrop of community life and use; for “the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form”.48 Of course, this is not to assert that attributions of value will be fixed in advance by current usage; but it is to recognise that such attributions must emerge from a context which already presumes many shared beliefs about value.

As a result, a value claim can be unreasonable in the light of widely shared ethical beliefs or norms. Consider the intended target of the critique of anthropocentrism: the person who thinks that nature is merely a stockpile of resources to be used as humans see fit. Such a person could not understand the basis of any ethical censure he might receive if he were to destroy some part of this stockpile, unless perhaps some other humans had a legitimate claim upon it. Earlier, I called this person a ‘substantive’ anthropocentrist to indicate his incomprehension that these mere resources might be objects of more than an instrumental evaluation by human beings. I also claimed that very few supposedly anthropocentric philosophers would be prepared to defend substantive anthropocentrism. This point should be striking given that environmental philosophers have commonly accused mainstream philosophy of relying upon an irredeemable Cartesian dualism of value separating human beings from all other forms of life. The environment thus fell on the wrong side of Kant’s distinction between persons and things, and could not be part of the realm of human values.

However, there are good reasons to think that this criticism aims at a straw-man. In Chapter 2, I argued that the development of an environmentalist consciousness, stimulated by a new awareness of human-induced environmental crises, has altered commonly accepted norms of good behaviour to include environmentally good behaviour. In previous eras, this kind of description would not have existed. But the fact that it does now signals a shift in widely shared beliefs about value. In this changed ethical landscape, ‘the environment’, or at least certain species or ecosystems that are taken to be synonymous with it, is seen as a comprehensible object of value. Of course, this is not to suggest that until the birth of modern environmentalism it was impossible to make environmental value attributions. In many traditional cultures, these were central to cultural identity and hence to ethical practice; indeed, in some surviving

47 Ibid., 52-53.
traditional cultures, environmental values continue to be similarly important. But if we simply recognise the implicit normativity, indeed the default positive valence attached in ordinary usage to concepts such as 'sustainable' or 'green', it is clear that something has changed in our global ethical landscape. While environmental philosophy has certainly contributed to this change (along with many other voices), it has gone awry in thinking that there was some serious alternative to thinking about value from a human perspective.

Why should this response be rationally compelling? Isn’t what I am calling a human perspective just a reflection of a particular environmentalist ‘worldview’? Interestingly, we don’t ordinarily treat it as one in the wider context in which value attributions are made. It is against a backdrop of substantial convergence about environmental value attributions that figures such as Jamieson’s skeptic must be assessed. Against this backdrop, such a person’s views cannot help but appear marginal and extreme. But the point here is not decided by appeal to popularity. The fact that a view is commonly held is important to the extent that good reasons can be found to support it. But the goodness of such justifying reasons is not measured according to external standards, but dialectically in a living tradition of valuing as a practice. I claim that the framing within which environmental value attributions are made and assessed is simply that of human values. That is, environmental values are appreciated only within a properly considered humanist perspective.

Consider McShane’s own preferred response to the skeptic. McShane claims that while “I might not be able to tell you whether a giant sequoia had ‘value’ inside of it... I can certainly tell you that it is awesome and majestic, and if you are skeptical, I can say a lot about what makes it that way”. Now we can add that it is not just the object itself that is of interest here, as if the skeptic could simply look again at the sequoia and see it differently. Instead, in advancing a claim about value, McShane is also introducing herself, as a valuer, into the picture as someone standing for it. Similarly, Jamieson exemplifies the value he sees in deserts by showing the skeptic how he responds to it. And, as I have said, this response also exemplifies the seriousness of the value attribution for the person making the claim, thus also inviting others to see the valued object as deserving of such esteem. Taking value attributions to be intelligible merely by reference to the objects themselves misses this fuller understanding of valuing as a practice. And we assume this practice to be serious, engaged, but also responsive to reasons. For this last component allows us to be mistaken as well as justified in thinking that our values really are appropriate.

A failure to appreciate environmental value is therefore a symptom of a deformed humanism, rather than a deformed perspective on nature. On the view I am recommending, the two cannot be separated without damage being done to both: a humanism absent environmental value is deficient qua humanism, while a perspective on environmental value that cannot link itself to a humanist perspective is deficient as a perspective on value. Moreover, as Bernard Williams has said, a humanist perspective is not simply a prejudice since we seem to lack any plausible alternative to it. As Williams says,

"To see the world from a human point of view is not an absurd thing to do. It is sometimes said that such a view implies that we regard human beings as the most important or valuable creatures in

49 McShane, "Neosentimentalism and Environmental Ethics," 17.
the universe. This would be an absurd thing to do, but it is not implied. To suppose that it is, is to make the mistake of identifying the point of view of the universe and the human point of view".51

A concern for nonhuman entities, as well as other environmental entities, is not ruled out by this perspective. But, as Williams points out, these concerns remain "a proper part of human life", which we can appreciate "only in terms of our understanding of ourselves".52 A critical perspective on value must, on pain of intelligibility, be grounded in this perspective. Fundamentally, this requires us to ask what sorts of things can be considered good in human life, and even what sorts of human lives can be considered good. The belief that our values have something going for them thus means that they are somehow an appropriate fit for a creature like us, in a world such as this. The rational criticism that is always possible in disagreements about value finds its standards precisely within this perspective.

V.

Finally, let us return to ask about the practical benefit of conceiving a disagreement of value along these lines. Given that the dispute between the environmentalist and her opponent is supposed to mirror actual disputes, and that such disputes often occur in the context of public policy proposals, we might wonder what the practical benefit of this proposal is. Although I have argued in favour of a method for assessing competing value claims, this is not to suggest that when such a dispute arises in practice it will be easy to work out what to do. While it is clear that value claims are offered in support of every policy proposal, these can never be simply derived from purely factual accounts of a state of affairs. There is no quick method for arriving at such answers, and certainly not one that is easily derivable from a theory of value. For instance, consider a method that is often thought to derive decisions or outcomes from values: cost benefit analysis. As the name itself implies, to come to a view about what to do informed by this method, we need to be careful to include all of the relevant costs, and all of the relevant benefits, be they social, economic, environmental, or whatever. But even if we suppose that we have factored in all of the relevant values, costs, and benefits, it is still not the case that a practical conclusion automatically follows.53 For this claim, we need additional reflection on the worth of the aims that the proposal targets. And there is no easy method for coming to this sort of decision.

While a theory of value is no substitute for deliberation, there is a further practical benefit to thinking about environmental value in the way I have recommended here. As we have said, prominent disagreements about environmental value often occur in the context of debates about the merits of particular public policy proposals, such as whether to construct a new mine or to log an area of state forest. These ‘debates’ can be highly polarised, and opponents can be content to talk past one another while appealing to others in the community that share their views. Commenting on this phenomenon in the US, Bryan Norton has said that greater consensus could be reached by calling to account the poor reasoning, false empirical claims, and questionable goals that are entangled in these disputes.54 While it is hard to disagree with the desirability of this claim, Norton adds that it ultimately falls to members of a community to hold

51 Ibid., 131.
52 Ibid.
the claims made by its members to account. The view of value I have outlined here would be an important contribution to such polarised disputes, because in the same way that members of the community can hold each other to account, they can also ask for better justifications of the values that are in play in such a public, deliberative context. Thus, as we saw, if someone were to propose a course of action that selectively ignored important environmental values, we could with justification say that this proposal was inappropriate because it disrespected values that really ought to be respected. And the soundness of this justification relies on its plausibility as a claim about what is important in human life.

While this is no short cut for further deliberation, this account does remove the exotic, extra-human quality that some have attached to environmental values. Instead, we are being asked to assess claims about what human beings find important, alongside other existing value claims, and without any initial hierarchy or division between human and non-human interests. Indeed, an important complement to this view is greater open-mindedness when we are presented with a claim that we do not agree with. As John McDowell puts it, "awareness that values are contentious tells against an unreflective contentment with the current state of one's critical outlook, and in favour of a readiness to suppose that there may be something to be learned from people with whom one's first inclination is to disagree".55 In coming to understand our own values better, we can come to understand not only why we consider them to be appropriate, but also what else we might be missing.

References


55 McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," 207.
Part II
Consumer Lifestyles, Sustainability and the Good Life

Introduction

Consumer lifestyles are thought to be both bad for the planet, and bad for us. Growth in consumption is a major cause of ecological problems, and constitutes a large threat to current and future generations. Social psychologists have also highlighted a number of ways in which consumerism undermines the quality of people’s lives. But at the level of the individual, consumer lifestyles are supported by ideas about happiness and the good life that seem to be unreflective and misguided. In this chapter, I explore two ‘philosophies of habit’, philosophical pragmatism and virtue ethics, which each provide distinctive accounts of how reflection on our habits can improve our lives. Of these, I argue that virtue ethics has the most to contribute to the problems raised by mass consumption: as a form of philosophical ‘therapy’, this account of reflection can encourage us to change problematic beliefs and behaviours, in order to live better human lives.

I.

It is thought that if the rest of the world were to adopt the lifestyles of the majority of people in wealthy nations, the entire collected resources of our planet could not support us. According to one calculation, if everyone were to adopt the average living standards of residents of the United States, we would require the resources of five planet Earths to support us.1 According to another estimate, since 1990 we have been living on ‘environmental credit’ – we have gone beyond the replacement capacity of Earth’s combined natural systems, which degrades them further to become less productive, and which increases extinction pressures on many species populations.2 Despite ambiguity over how the concept of sustainability should be defined, on any moderately sensible conception current trends of mass consumption look to be seriously unsustainable and dangerous.3

While the diffusion of consumer lifestyles has brought significant and lasting improvements in the material living standards of many, their continued proliferation now constitutes a significant threat to future generations.4 The rise of mass consumption also seems to disproportionately threaten poorer nations that have benefitted least from it. According to one UN estimate, 20% of people globally (corresponding roughly with the combined populations of wealthy nations) consume more than 85% of material goods and services, while the poorest 20% of people consume only around 1%.5 Given concerns with our present rates of resource depletion, we cannot even imagine a world in which these patterns were universalised. Another well-known

5 Ibid., 2.
consequence of the rise of mass consumption is the dramatic increase in carbon dioxide emissions over the last century. The UN found that growth in consumption was responsible for a five-fold increase in demand for fossil fuels since 1950, corresponding with a four-fold increase in global emissions.6 And in a recent study, Dhanda & Hill confirmed that the increased prevalence of consumer lifestyles in a society tended to produce greater environmental damage through an increase in greenhouse gas emissions.7 Given the dangers of existing patterns of mass consumption becoming the global norm, there is a pressing need to re-evaluate how those of us in wealthy countries live.

The marked change in these patterns of behaviour since industrialisation has also caused a change in perceptions of what level of consumption is considered normal in these societies. For instance, Elizabeth Shove has explored changing patterns of behaviour associated with cleanliness in the UK, and particularly the patterns of bathing, laundering, and indoor heating and cooling.8 Comparing the habits of modern Britons with those of the Victorians and with those of the early twentieth century, Shove argues that rising material standards have supported the development of extremely high, and ultimately unsustainable, expectations of comfort and cleanliness. According to Shove, there is now a great danger of "sweeping, cross cultural convergence in what people take to be normal ways of life, and a consequent locking in of demand for the resources on which these ways depend".9 Instead, Shove suggests we consider a "revised agenda of consumption, everyday life and sustainability", which focuses on "the processes through which habits are acquired and jettisoned, and on the relation between consumption and convention, technology and practice". But Shove's historical analysis also shows that our current consumption patterns are not fixed. Moreover, there is a great deal of scope to minimise the energy demands and hence the environmental impact of consumer lifestyles in wealthy nations. In their study, Dhanda & Hill also found that those in wealthy nations had "standards of living so high that it would be possible for them to alter consumption to safeguard the environment while still retaining healthy and affluent life conditions".10

Strikingly, modern consumer lifestyles appear to be not only dangerous, but psychologically unrewarding. As is well known, a large body of research suggests that increases in wealth do not affect assessments of subjective wellbeing once a relatively low threshold has been reached.11 In an important contribution, Kasser et al. claim that modern corporate capitalism actually constitutes an ideology embedded in wealthy consumer societies, which "fosters and encourages a set of values based in self-interest, a strong desire for financial success, high levels of consumption, and interpersonal styles based on competition", while tending to "oppose... goals and values for caring about the broader world, cultivating close interpersonal relationships, and, especially among poorer individuals, feeling worthy and free".12 People who

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6 Ibid., 2-3.
9 Ibid., 199.
10 Dhanda, "Consumption and Environmental Degradation: A Long-Term View," 308.
11 For a review of this research, see Ed Diener and Martin E.P. Seligman, "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being," Psychological Science in the Public Interest 5, no. 1 (2004).
12 Tim Kasser, Cohn, Steve, Kanner, Allen D., Ryan, Richard M., "Some Costs of American Corporate Capitalism: A Psychological Exploration of Value and Goal Conflicts," Psychological Inquiry 18, no. 1 (2007). This is a review article, from which I take many of the citations that follow.
internalise these values are more likely to report poorer subjective wellbeing, to have weaker self-esteem, and even to suffer from a range of pathologies linked with excessive consumption. Significant correlations have been found between more materialistic values and less generous behaviour. Moreover, materialistic values are correlated with fewer pro-social and more anti-social behaviours such as cheating and petty theft. The high evaluation of financial success is also correlated with less empathy, more Machiavellian tendencies, and a greater proneness to racism. Furthermore, social dilemma research suggests that the more one has internalised consumeristic values, the more likely one is to treat others in competitive ways, and the less likely one is to share resources.

Implicit in consumer ideology is a conception of human beings as inherently self-interested, aggressively acquisitive and competitive. However, part of what is lacking in this conception is recognition of the inherent sociality of human beings. For our subjective wellbeing seems to be more affected by our interpersonal relationships and by other meaningful activities in our lives than by a surplus or absence of consumer goods. But the internalisation of materialistic values seems to undermine both the quality and the quantity of interpersonal relationships, firstly by encouraging people to work longer hours so that they can afford more consumer items, but over time by increasing tendencies to view other people primarily as potential means to our ends. Unsurprisingly, greater internalisation of materialistic values also seems to correspond with poorer quality interpersonal relationships.

21 Kasser, "Frugality, Generosity, and Materialism in Children and Adolescents."
22 As Kasser et al. point out, "many psychological theories propose that a focus on self-interest and competition reflects immature psychological development and/or psychopathology", and instead recognise that "co-operative, altruistic motives" are also part of our nature. See "Some Costs of American Corporate Capitalism: A Psychological Exploration of Value and Goal Conflicts," 6.
24 Kasser, "Some Costs of American Corporate Capitalism: A Psychological Exploration of Value and Goal Conflicts."
25 Kasser, "A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration."; Kennon M. Sheldon, and Kasser, Tim, "Coherence and Congruence: Two Aspects of
People with more consumeristic values also report poorer self-esteem and self-worth. As Kasser et al. note, the ideology of consumer society "promotes particular states (wealth) or individuals (the wealthy) as worthy ideals to which people living under the system should compare themselves". But upward social comparison with wealthy, and hence, 'successful' people is psychologically damaging because it creates "feelings of insecurity and unhappiness in individuals", increasing awareness of the gap between themselves and those they aspire to become. Moreover, few people would not suffer some psychological costs from upward social comparison, given the highly hierarchical structure of societies dominated by the values of modern consumer capitalism.

The logic of social comparison within consumeristic societies was identified in Thorstein Veblen’s concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’. According to Veblen:

"The basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing pecuniary strength, and so of gaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods... Very much squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretense of pecuniary decency is put away".

Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption is instantly recognisable in the familiar idiom of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. Tibor Scitovsky has suggested that there is a powerful psychological motivation in desiring to ‘keep up with the Joneses’, which is "to gain and assert [one’s] membership in the society around him". However, the kind of status seeking that defines itself in terms of wealth alone does not typically contribute to the wellbeing of others, since status seeking of this sort is zero-sum: when my own wealth increases, it only brings a corresponding change in my social ranking if someone else’s wealth remains stable or
declines.\textsuperscript{32} As Scitovsky puts it, with conspicuous consumption our superior status is achieved through the acquisition of appropriately status-conferring goods:

“A large income is best advertised by largesse in spending, by not pinching pennies, by not counting too finely the cost of consumption, and by buying conspicuous objects because of their high cost rather than in spite of it. There clearly is no limit to such spending, and, since the supply of status satisfaction so obtained is limited, that satisfaction is one of insatiable demand. As I spend more on prestige goods, I gain in status but cause others to lose; as others spend more to regain their lost status, they inflict a corresponding loss of status on me, and there need be neither an end to such competitive increase in conspicuous consumption nor any gain to the players engaged in this competitive game taken as a whole”\textsuperscript{33}

Because we are talking about patterns of behaviour that are encouraged at a societal level, it is clear that an adequate response to this threat will need to address the structural, institutional forces implicitly at work in promoting consumer behaviours. However, the focus of the present essay is on the beliefs and implicit conceptions of happiness and the good life that are accepted by individuals that have internalised the values of consumerism. Given the dangers associated with mass consumption, on the one hand, and its psychological costs on the other, there seems to be an urgent need to re-evaluate how many of us in affluent societies are living. As the empirical literature demonstrates, if one believes that happiness is the result of consumer purchases, and that the good life is the materially abundant life, one is much more likely to consume excessively. It is thus important to address these ideas, and the reasoning that appears to support them. But in talking about consumer lifestyles, we are primarily talking about the habitual behaviours which constitute them. Changing our lifestyles means, first and foremost, changing the problematic habits that constitute them, namely the habits of eating, shopping, cleaning, recreation, and socialising with others that are characteristic of Western consumer societies. This raises a further question about the role of habits in our lives, and the values and goods that our habits express. For, if our habits are directed at unsatisfying and unsustainable ends, then we have reason to reflect on our attachment to them.

\textbf{II.}

It is necessary, first of all, to explore the concept of habit more fully. We typically think of habits as somehow automatic, such as my habit of reading the newspaper in the morning: I do this with little conscious prompting or thought about what I am doing, or even why I am doing it. Moreover, we generally understand that habits are acquired through repeated action, which implies that my habit of reading the newspaper has developed out of my previously \textit{choosing} to do so a sufficient number of times. This already brings into view a puzzling relationship between the choices we make to do certain things, and the habits we develop from acting on them repeatedly.

A predominant view among psychologists is to think of habit as a response to particular contextual cues, but over which we exert little intentional control. In a recent psychological review, Neale et al. defined habits as “automated response dispositions that are cued by aspects...

\textsuperscript{32} As Scitovsky puts it, a “gain in status by anyone becomes merely a change in ranking, which changes only the distribution of status satisfaction but leaves unchanged the sum total of such satisfactions if we attach equal weight to the satisfaction different people get from their ranking in society”. Ibid., 119.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 119-20.
of the performance context (i.e., environment, preceding actions)... learned through a process in which repetition incrementally tunes cognitive processors in procedural memory [i.e., the memory system that supports the minimally conscious control of skilled action]”. Indeed, the evolutionary advantages gained from making actions habitual, and hence less cognitively onerous, explains why habits seem to be such common features of ordinary life. Neale et al. found that “in experience sampling diary studies using both student and community samples, approximately 45% of everyday behaviours tended to be repeated in the same location almost every day”.

However, while plausible, this broad psychological definition of habit does not distinguish between different kinds of habit. One distinction which appears to be crucial to the present discussion is that between habits as skills, aptitudes or abilities, such as critical thinking, and habits that we classify as tendencies or inclinations, such as over-eating. This distinction is well expressed by John Dewey, who argued that “the difference between the artist and the mere technician is unmistakable. The artist is a masterful technician. The technique or mechanism is fused with thought and feeling. The ‘mechanical’ performer permits the mechanism to dictate the performance. It is absurd to say that the latter exhibits habit and the former not. We are confronted with two kinds of habit, intelligent and routine”. Although we have the idea of ‘skilled consumption’ in the concept of the connoisseur, it is habit as a tendency or inclination that is most relevant to our focus on consumer lifestyles, and the behaviours that typically constitute them.

This distinction may account for one of the more prominent philosophical disagreements about habit, that of Kant and Aristotle. Kant thinks of habit as “physical inner necessitation to proceed in the same manner that one has proceeded until now”, and hence he takes quite a negative view of habit as something that “impairs the freedom of the mind and... leads to thoughtless repetition of the very same act”. Indeed, if we consider habits as tendencies or inclinations, then there is some plausibility to this view. However, Aristotle maintains that living well means primarily managing our habits by developing good ones and modifying or avoiding the formation of bad ones. And Aristotle argues that the ethical virtues are themselves habits,

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35 Ibid.


38 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View; Edited by Robert B. Louden, Manfred Kuehn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40. Because Kant thinks of habit as something that threatens the freedom of our wills to determine action, he claims that “[a]s a rule, all habits are reprehensible”, and that habitual action is deprived of moral worth, and even risks assimilating human behaviour to the “mechanical” movements of animals. Kant’s view of habit may result from his dualistic philosophy, in which anything that did not belong to the noumenal realm along with Reason must belong to the phenomenal realm, which was deterministic, and hence ‘unfree’. For further discussion, see Clare Carlisle, "Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaisson on Habit and the Moral Life," *Inquiry* 53, no. 2 (2010).
understood analogously with skills which we acquire through practice, by acting well. 39 Thus, Aristotle seems to be talking about a wider array of behaviours under the description of habits than Kant. 40 For Aristotle views habits dynamically as patterns of response which are relatively fixed and stable, but which are also capable of modification in the same way that they are acquired, namely through repetitive behaviour. Moreover, as with Dewey, Aristotle’s view of habit emphasises that repetition does not degenerate into routine, thoughtless behaviour. Instead, habituated responses can be intelligent although they are the product of repetition.41

In a recent discussion, Clare Carlisle argues that what is distinctive about habits is that they are somehow ‘unseen’ by us, or unavailable to our reflective awareness. 42 Kierkegaard wrote that, “of all enemies, habit is perhaps the most cunning, and above all it is cunning enough never to let itself be seen, because the person who sees the habit is saved from the habit”. 43 Carlisle argues that “one way to deal with a tenacious unwanted habit is to lead it back to the sphere of consciousness, for only here can it be influenced by reflection and the will”.44 Given the prevalence of habit in our lives, Carlisle claims that effective reflection on our habits would involve, firstly, “the cultivation of good habits and the elimination of unwanted habits”, but also “preventing the latter from taking hold within the body through the development of certain patterns of receptivity and resistance that is based on clear and experiential understanding”.45

Carlisle draws attention to a method of reflection in which we focus our attention on the everyday thoughts, sensations and feelings we experience and the patterns that these associations fall into.46 The benefit of bringing our habits back to our awareness is that we are only then able to reflect on what we are aimed at. For, another consequence of the ‘unseen’ nature of habit is that we will often be as unaware of the ends that our habits aim at as we are of the habits we have. The stronger a habit becomes, the less aware we seem to be of the intention that originally animated it, while our greater awareness of intentionality signals that an action is less habitual. However, this appearance does not mean that habits, or even entire ways of living, do not express our intentions. Consider, for instance, a person who we describe as being ‘just about making money’: what we mean by such a description is not necessarily that he has only

39 And the relevant sense of goodness or badness implicit in acting well will emerge from consideration of the good life for human beings, which is both the focus and the guiding assumption of Aristotle’s ethical enquiry.

40 Moreover, as Carlisle notes, Kant’s concerns about habit as deterministic are not shared by Aristotle, who does not recognise the separation between determined nature, and the undetermined (and hence free) will. See "Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaisson on Habit and the Moral Life.”

41 Julia Annas writes that both practical skills and virtues require “more than predictably similar reaction; they require a response which is appropriate to the situation instead of merely being the same as that produced in response to other situations”. Moreover, Annas points out that the virtues are “states that enable us to respond in creative and imaginative ways to new challenges. No routine could enable us to do this”. See Julia Annas, Intelligent Virtue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

42 Carlisle, "Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaisson on Habit and the Moral Life.”


44 "Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaisson on Habit and the Moral Life,” 141.

45 Ibid., 142.

46 Awareness of this sort, Carlisle claims, can be “deliberately cultivated in certain therapeutic and spiritual exercises – for example, in psychoanalysis or cognitive behavioural therapy, and in Buddhist meditation techniques, which reportedly provide accomplished practitioners with the ability to observe sensations, emotions and thoughts as they arise, from moment to moment” (141).
one end in life, but that he characteristically aims at making money, where this intention explains much (if not most) of what he does.

One reason to think that habits do indeed reflect our aims, and hence our intentions, even when we cease to be aware of them, is that it remains possible to ask someone for an explanation of what he is doing. Indeed, according to Elizabeth Anscombe, our concept of the intentional, along with our concept of the voluntary, would not exist “if the question ‘Why?’ with answers that give reasons for acting, did not”. Although there are some cases, for example involuntary starts or twitches, where this question does not ask us about intentions, according to Anscombe, “the term ‘intentional’ has reference to a form of description of events. What is essential to this form is displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question ‘Why?’”. I want to suggest here that so long as it is possible to ask ‘Why?’ about a pattern of behaviour, where what we are asking for is an intentional account rather than, say, a biological description, habitual behaviours can also be understood as intentional in a meaningful sense.

Indeed, this kind of questioning about intentions, and hence about the goodness of our aims, also seems to be the basis for ethical reflection. For it is because we can ask each other (and ourselves) about what we intend that further questions about the appropriateness of these intentions, and hence our behaviour, become possible. This familiar point suggests that we can also look at the intentions reflected in the habits most associated with overconsumption, such as habits of eating, shopping, cleaning, recreation, and socialising with others, and ask what ends they are characteristically directed towards. However, reflection on our values and our habits seems to take on a different aspect according to the conception of value and living well which one adopts. In the example given above, a person who sees the good life as a life of wealth, and hence who cultivates habits that aim at this goal, would seem to reflect on the adequacy of his habits in quite a different way from someone with a conception of living well that emphasised the importance of good interpersonal relationships. How, then, should we think about reflection in general? In the next section I explore the distinctive account of reflection provided by philosophical pragmatism, and its adequacy as a method of reflecting on the problematic habits associated with excessive consumption.

III.

According to pragmatists, reflection on our habits occurs when our habits no longer achieve the ends they were directed towards. Pragmatists echo the psychological observation that habits often operate beneath our conscious awareness, and hence they emphasise that changes to our behavioural context must precede recognition of the need for reflection. Pragmatists see

47 I note that it remains a matter of some controversy in philosophy how these three senses of intention relate to one another, and especially whether one of these senses is more basic than the others. And there is an even more fundamental disagreement among those who think that intentions are a sort of internal ‘mental event’, and those who do not.


49 Anscombe writes that “[e]vents are typically described in this form when ‘in order to’ or ‘because’ (in one sense) is attached to their descriptions: ‘I slid on the ice because I felt cheerful’. ‘Sliding on ice’ is not itself a type of description, like ‘offending someone’, which is directly dependent on our possessing the form of description of intentional actions. Thus we can speak of the form of the description ‘intentional actions’, and of the descriptions which occur in this form, and note that of these some are and some are not dependent on the existence of this form for their own sense”. Ibid., 85.

ethics as an 'experimental' process akin to scientific investigation: it proceeds through observation and trial and error, where existing moral beliefs or principles as tested as hypotheses in action. A pragmatist account of how we modify our habits is also remarkably similar to the prominent view among psychologists concerning self-regulation of habits, which is thought to proceed "by comparing current states with goals and engaging control processes when the two are discrepant".\(^{51}\)

Pragmatists draw attention to the uneasiness felt when an entrenched habit breaks down: that is, when the smooth functioning of our habits is interrupted by some change in our behavioural context, our attention is drawn to the habits we have. When this occurs, pragmatists claim that a need for reflection (or 'valuation') arises. Pragmatists call this reflective moment the 'problematic situation', where we must weigh our ends in light of how effectively our present behaviours attain the goods we aim at. On this view, the ends we aim at are held to be good only so long as they prove to be useful or helpful to us.\(^{52}\) And when a situation calling for re-evaluation occurs, we must weigh these apparent goods in light of their future consequences.\(^{53}\)

Here is Elizabeth Anderson's take on pragmatist reflection:

"The need to reflect intelligently on what one is doing arises when the ordinary operation of habit or impulse is blocked... The aim of deliberation is to find a satisfactory means to resumption of activity by solving the problem posed by one's situation. Deliberation involves an investigation of the causes of disrupted activity so as to consciously articulate the problematic features of one's situation, and an imaginative rehearsal of alternative means to solving it, anticipating the consequences of executing each one, including one's attitudes to those consequences. It is a thought experiment designed to arrive at a practical judgment, action upon which is anticipated to resolve one's predicament".\(^{54}\)

The key to this view of reflection is that it is motivated by the unease we feel when our habits have ceased to function smoothly. Given this motivation, our reflective attention is focused on solving the problem in a way that alleviates our unease.

Let us consider the applicability of a pragmatist account of reflection against an example in which a habit has become problematic. Consider someone with the habit of purchasing fast food every Friday evening: without thinking twice, let us suppose, this person goes to the same fast food outlet, and buys the same thing. Now consider how this habit might be rendered problematic. Let us imagine that a prominent animal welfare campaign has raised public awareness about the cruelty involved in factory farming, and that there is strong evidence

51 Neal, "Habits—a Repeat Performance." 200.


suggesting that this person’s favourite outlet is implicated in this practice. The end to which this person’s habit had been directed, namely getting a certain sort of desired product, has been interrupted by this new information, and he is now supposed to weigh the value of this end in terms of its expected consequences, examining the issue now from this point of view, now from that point of view. What would count as solving this problem? Will any solution be satisfactory, so long as one’s psychological unease disappears?

A typical concern about pragmatism is that it reduces evaluation of ends to a sort of crude instrumentalism in which whatever I desire is taken to be my unquestioned starting-point. I then weigh possible courses of action, and the value judgements implied in them, in terms of their effectiveness. If pragmatists were indeed committed to this view, then the recommended process of re-evaluation would have little to offer beyond looking for the most effective means by which to return to a state of smooth functioning. But if so, my antecedently specified end of getting what I want, in this case getting the food that I desire, could just be reaffirmed by finding an alternative means to its realisation, for instance by effectively deceiving oneself about how this food is produced. But, as John Dewey points out, for pragmatists our identification of means and ends is reciprocally determined: the ends which we set ourselves are only properly understood when we consider the indispensable means to their fulfilment. So, when in our example this person realises that his fast food habit is based on cruelty to animals, he is supposed to re-evaluate the goodness of this end (i.e., getting what he wants, in this case a certain sort of meal) in light of a desire to return to a state of smooth functioning. Thus, what distinguishes a pragmatic account of reasoning from, say, a Humean desire-based view of reasoning is that on the former view a revised end should emerge in the context of deliberation constituted by the problematic situation.

But the problem is that this approach mischaracterises what is actually wrong in such a situation. It is not that we simply have a ‘desire’ to return to a state of smooth functioning, where almost any result will do; typically, we want to return to a good state of functioning. We can see this more clearly by considering the sort of awareness that characterises the problematic situation. For, returning to our example, someone might have always had the belief that cruelty was generally to be avoided; or he might never have thought about it, but might have been impressed by the response of many in my community to allegations of animal cruelty, and so now formed a belief about it; or he might have thought all along that cruelty to animals in particular was unimportant, and what was truly important was getting what one wants. These different reactions reflect ethical beliefs that are implicit in one’s behaviour. In this example, the end is not simply a desire for food in whatever form of whatever sort. Similarly, one does not simply have a ‘desire’ to resolve a breakdown in the smooth functioning of one’s habits, but a particular kind of desire for a particular kind of resolution, namely one that is subjectively comprehensible as good, where not just any result will do. But what happens when our desires are ethically problematic? Pragmatists claim that, in the long run, if we are sufficiently rational, experience will sort false ethical beliefs from accurate ones, because false beliefs will render

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55 Indeed, John Dewey claimed that until consequences have been considered, we do not even know the value of something. See How We Think, p. 202: “Not until a thing has been tried—‘tried out,’ in colloquial language—do we know its true worth. Till then it may be pretense, a bluff. But the thing that has come out victorious in a test or trial of strength carries its credentials with it; it is approved, because it has been proved. Its value is clearly evinced, shown, i.e. demonstrated”.

56 There are also obvious social constraints on such an end, for desires that are completely free from wider social norms could never be defensible on this view.
themselves problematic in practice. But this response invites questions about the adequacy of pragmatic reflection, for in the case of mass consumption we find certain ideas about the good life and about happiness that encourage problematic behaviours, and yet show no signs of becoming less popular or widely acceptable.

Nonetheless, there is something fundamentally illuminating about the pragmatist view, namely, that a central difficulty in encouraging a change in habituated behaviour is our lack of awareness about the habits we have, and more importantly, of the ends or values implicit in these behaviours. This, I take it, is the basic idea in the concept of the ‘problematic situation’: when a breakdown in our smooth, unreflective functioning occurs, we can suddenly see not only *that* we have a particular habit, but also *why* we do, which is the end toward which our habituated action aims. In the next section, I build on this point by outlining an alternative method of bringing our ends within an evaluative framework which allows us to ask not only what the consequences of different behaviours might be, but whether we are aiming at genuine goods.

**IV.**

The second account of reflection we will consider here is grounded in the virtue-ethical tradition, about which we have already heard a great deal in Part I of this work. As I have said, virtue ethics typically involves some conception of human nature, and a conception of human good based upon this. Thus, Aristotle’s influential view begins from the assumption that human beings are fundamentally rational, social animals, and explores what living well for such a creature might amount to. Similarly with the pragmatist account of reflection, virtue ethics encourages reflection in response to dissatisfaction with how things are going for us. As Julia Annas writes, “most of us are dissatisfied with both our achievement and our promise, and it is only the dissatisfied who have the urge to live differently, and hence the need to find out what ways of living differently would be improvements”. But, unlike pragmatists, who focus on the discomfort we experience when a particular behaviour ceases to function smoothly, on this

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58 However, this point is not a pragmatist discovery, but something that has been observed by many. As we saw above, Kierkegaard noticed that habits are typically ‘unseen’ by our reflective awareness. Consider, also, the following passage from Seneca, discussing Epicurus: “Consciousness of our errors is the first step to salvation’. This remark of Epicurus’ is to me a very good one. For a person who is not aware that he is doing anything wrong has no desire to be put right. You have to catch yourself doing it before you can reform”. From Letters from a Stoic: Epistolae Morales Ad Lucilium; Selected and Translated from the Latin, with an Introduction by Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 2004), 77.

59 See Chapter 2 for further discussion of human nature, and its relation to environmental value.


view reflection is motivated by a more general sense of dissatisfaction with aspects of one’s life, and even with one’s life as a whole.\textsuperscript{62}

In ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, ethical philosophy was aimed at the practical end of improving our lives. As Aristotle says, in ethics the “end is not knowing things but doing them”: we do ethics not for the intellectual challenge, but in order to act well.\textsuperscript{63} Despite differences between the various schools of ancient philosophy, there was general agreement about the centrality of critical reflection in living well, and the role of philosophy as a practical guide in this pursuit. As Annas notes, Aristotle took it as simply obvious that any rational adult would, at some point, feel dissatisfied with some aspect of his life, or with some aspect of himself, and that this would motivate further thought about his life as a whole.\textsuperscript{64} Indeed, Annas claims that Aristotle would have “nothing to say directly to those who have never reached this point of reflection about their lives or are unimpressed by it: the dull and the complacent, for example”.\textsuperscript{65} The thought behind this apparently dogmatic claim is the intuitive point that when we reflect on aspects of our lives, we will often find further things that are unsatisfactory. Some might worry that this comprehensive sort of reflection is both unnecessary for analysing problematic habits, and overly demanding in general; for I can surely understand what is unsatisfactory about a particular habit, without having to reflect on my life as a whole. Indeed, some might also doubt whether we can do this at all. The intuition here is rather that reflection is like pulling at a loose thread on a garment: eventually, if we keep pulling at the thread, the entire garment will unravel. But this makes reflection a habit of its own, but one more akin to a skill. As such, we need not begin reflecting by taking a comprehensive view of our lives as a whole; the claim is rather that, if we follow it through, we will eventually come to such a view of ourselves. It is therefore a distinctive claim of ancient philosophy that reflection must eventually require us to take a broad view of our lives as a whole, for this kind of thinking is held to be essential for living well.

The famous inscription, ‘Know Thyself’, found at the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and the perhaps even more famous Socratic maxim that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’, both point to the centrality of reflection in ancient ethics. In the \textit{Apology}, Socrates claims that “the very best thing a man can do” is to “let no day pass without discussing goodness”, along with “all the other subjects” relating to it.\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, Socrates focused primarily on ethical topics because he

\textsuperscript{62}This view need not be hostile to the pragmatist account of problematic habits; what it is hostile to is the idea that we look at individual behaviours without looking more generally at how these contribute to our lives as a whole, rather than just how well certain values are realised by certain behaviours.

\textsuperscript{63}Aristotle, NE, 1095-5-6. From \textit{Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics / Translation (with Historical Introduction) by Christopher Rowe ; Philosophical Introduction and Commentary by Sarah Broadie}, ed. Sarah Broadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). As Sarah Broadie remarks, “someone who studies ethics with no eye to a practical end must really believe that the study can make no practical difference, either because philosophers’ conclusions cannot influence behaviour or because no conclusion is possible. Yet whoever really believes this should not bother with ethics except perhaps in quotation marks, as a cultural curiosity. For if ethics is supposed to be practical but cannot be, serious attention to ethical arguments is a waste of time. There are better ways of being practical, and if we want to exercise our intellects there are more rigorous disciplines than ethics for that”. From \textit{Ethics with Aristotle} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-4.

\textsuperscript{64}Annas, \textit{The Morality of Happiness}, 33.

\textsuperscript{65}Ibid.

believed that most of his fellow Athenians had relatively unreflective beliefs about the good life, and how to live it. This is most vividly illustrated in the early Platonic dialogues by Socrates’ method of cross-examination, the 'elenchus', which aims to draw out contradictions in his interlocutors’ beliefs. Although these early dialogues typically end without positive conclusions, the purpose of Socrates’ apparently negative philosophical method is not simply to tear down his opponents’ views, but to encourage further critical thought.

As many ancient philosophers emphasised, practical philosophy involves learning to think better about our goals and our values, and to moderate the negative effect of distorting or inappropriate emotions. These views take it for granted that we all remember things that we have done when in a certain mood or emotional state that we have later regretted, or goals we once pursued that we no longer consider worthwhile. Interestingly, there are important links between this general view of philosophy as a form of ‘rational therapy’, and modern psychotherapy. In a recent discussion, Donald Robertson has explored the links between ancient philosophy and the two leading varieties of cognitive therapy, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Indeed, Robertson argues that “[m]odern psychotherapy, especially in the form of cognitive-behaviour therapy... can also be viewed as part of an ancient therapeutic tradition derived from the informal philosophical circle surrounding Socrates”.

Albert Ellis, the founder REBT, claimed that much of his theory “was derived from philosophy rather than psychology”. Indeed, Ellis attributes one of the central claims of REBT to the Stoic Epictetus, who taught that “[m]en are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them”. According to Still and Dryden, Epictetus’ maxim remains central to REBT, and is “even given to clients during the early sessions, as a succinct way of capturing the starting point”. Aaron Beck’s theory of CBT also makes much of Epictetus’ distinction between what happens to us, and our attitudes and perceptions about what happens. Like Ellis, Beck credits the Stoics, and eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and Taoism, with the central ideas of his

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68 Robertson, The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (Cbt) [Electronic Resource] : Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy, xix. In his discussion, Robertson focuses particularly on the links between Roman Stoicism and modern psychotherapy. Indeed, Robertson points out that Stoicism meets all of the necessary criteria to be classified as a form of CBT, a point which is also acknowledged by leading CBT experts. For this latter claim, see Dobson, K. S., and Dozois, D. J., 2001, “Historical and philosophical bases of the cognitive-behavioral tradition”, 4. In Keith S. Dobson, Handbook of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies [Electronic Resource], 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford Publications, Inc., 2009).


70 Cited in Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy, Revised and updated ed. (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub. Group, 1994), 35. Indeed, Ellis writes that “[m]any of the principles incorporated in the theory of rational-emotive psychotherapy are not new; some of them, in fact, were originally stated several thousand years ago, especially by the Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers (such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius) and by some of the ancient Taoist and Buddhist thinkers”.


theory. Beck writes that these ancient traditions “have emphasized that human emotions are based on ideas. Control of most intense feelings may be achieved by changing one’s ideas”. Indeed, Beck claims that “[c]ognitive therapy uses primarily the Socratic method”. This is because the Socratic method of cross-examination draws people’s attention to contradictory or problematic beliefs, with the aim of changing the behaviour that is motivated by them. As Robertson says, “people find themselves in contradiction because their natural, commonsense preconceptions of the characteristics that make up the good life, the human ideal, subtly conflict with the life they actually find themselves pursuing. To persuade people to change their philosophy of life, fundamentally, they must be shown that their current beliefs are not in their own best interests”.

This view of how reflection on our beliefs and our behaviour can alter problematic habits and ways of living seems both practically and philosophically attractive. As we have seen, there is substantial evidence that prevailing ideas about the good life in consumer societies are unsatisfying and problematic. Indeed, ancient philosophers seem to anticipate these claims. Diogenes Laertius relates the following anecdote showing Socrates’ attitude towards material excess: “And often, when he beheld the multitude of things which were being sold, he would say to himself, ‘How many things are there which I do not want’. And he was continually repeating these iambics: ‘For silver plate and purple [robes] useful are, for actors on the stage but not for men’. Philip Cafaro points out that a similar disdain for a life aimed at material goods was shared by many ancient philosophers. According to Cafaro, “[f]or Plato and Aristotle, Seneca and Epicurus, the good life was equally a life devoted to right thinking and a life not devoted to wealth getting or sybaritism”.

And in a later discussion, Gambrel and Cafaro argue that a life of “voluntary simplicity” would promote human wellbeing more effectively than a commitment to the values and aspirations of consumer society. On this view, while living more simply requires a decrease in consumption behaviour, it also involves more mindful consumer behaviour, as well as greater appreciation of the place of all goods (material or otherwise) in one’s life. If we aim to live more simply, then over time we would also expect our habits of shopping, eating, and recreation to become more moderate and sparing. Gambrel and Cafaro also suggest that living a more simple life will be more conducive to the flourishing of individuals and human societies, while diminishing pressure on the ecosystems supporting them. These claims find ready support in the large

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
80 Gambrel and Cafaro even claim that voluntary simplicity is a “virtue disposing us to act appropriately within the sphere of our consumer decisions”. See ibid., 90.
81 Ibid., 95-97.
body of existing research into subjective wellbeing, which suggests that good interpersonal relationships, meaningful work, and other important goals are more important to us than achieving our narrow self-interests.\footnote{For instance, Jonathan Porritt writes that the consensus view among researchers is that human wellbeing is “determined far more by the quality of [people’s] working life, their family life and their overall social relationships – all seem to be more important relatively than the amount of consumption they are able to enjoy. And if that consumption is increasingly eroding the quality of those other aspects...then it is clearly far less beneficial than it might at first sight appear”. From Great Britain. Sustainable Development Commission and J. Porritt, *Redefining Prosperity: Resource Productivity, Economic Growth and Sustainable Development (Sdc Report)* (Sustainable Development Commission, 2003), 6.}

But these claims also clearly depend upon a more general conception of the value of consumer behaviour in human life. In this respect, it is helpful to consider Aristotle's point that some goods, such as wealth and social status, are by their nature merely extrinsically or instrumentally good. A life devoted to gaining public honours is unsatisfactory because the goodness of such a life depends entirely upon what other people think about us.\footnote{For Aristotle's discussion of lives aiming at extrinsic goods, see * Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I.} Of course, undue attachment to such goods would make us greatly subject to contingency. Similarly, undue attachment to consumption makes us greatly subject to contingency, since our ability to distinguish ourselves via consumption depends on the relative consumption of others, and since all such behaviour depends upon prevailing economic conditions. Moreover, consumption behaviour reveals little about our intrinsic qualities or merits as people, but much about how we wish to be seen by others. Consumption behaviours aimed at the gratification of desire are also subject to a 'hedonic treadmill' effect, where continued consumption is required to satisfy an unending set of desires.

In contrast, some goods look to be universal for rational, social creatures like human beings. The bonds of friendship, of family, and community are not accidental features of human life, such that we could live well even if these things were lacking. We depend on the support of others to become independent practical reasoners, and to support us when we are not able to support ourselves fully, which, when one considers the life cycle of human beings, seems to make up a large part of our lives if we consider our dependence during both childhood and old age.\footnote{This is MacIntyre's central thesis in *Dependent Rational Animals*.} We also have meaningful aims to pursue in life, aims which develop from our interests and abilities.\footnote{See Bernard Williams' discussion of the importance of these 'ground projects', in J. J. C. Smart, Williams, Bernard, *Utilitarianism for and Against*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge, Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 116-17.} Again, these points seem supported by research into life satisfaction, but they are also fairly familiar and obvious if we consider the way that people actually structure their lives. However, these are precisely the sorts of values that consumerism tends to crowd out. Reflection on our habits requires us to think about the goodness of the ends that our habits aim at, because it should ultimately be for the sake of these ends that our habits are allowed to endure. To be clear, as creatures who must consume in order to survive, critical reflection does not aim to leave us with no consumer habits at all. But by reflecting in this way, we can replace consumer habits that are environmentally and psychologically problematic with habits that are both more sustainable, more fulfilling and more rewarding.
On this conception, practical philosophy involves learning to think better about our goals and our values. But what happens when a person with problematic habits does not feel the need to reflect on them? Because the virtue ethical approach claims that human beings are fundamentally social, even if we do not recognise a problem in our own behaviour, other people can help us to see this by encouraging us to reflect on what we are doing. Although we may not realise when our habits have ceased to serve our true interests, criticism from those who know us well is invaluable in bringing our habits back into our awareness, where we are able to re-evaluate the intentions that they express. We require precisely these kinds of supportive relationships to challenge our reasoning in the right kind of way, and we are thus dependent on others when we fall into bad habits that we find difficult to break on our own. And, although this sort of social criticism can be conducted in the wrong spirit, it remains a powerful and effective means of reforming harmful or destructive habits.

As such, even if we do not recognise a problem in our own behaviour, other people can help us to see this by encouraging us to reflect on what we are doing, and the reasons we give in support. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that it is primarily “by being called to account for ourselves and our actions by others, that we learn how to scrutinize ourselves as they scrutinize us and how to understand ourselves as they understand us.”

For in calling someone to account, MacIntyre suggests that one must try to “offer at least a partial explanation of how as a practical reasoner one could have come to make the judgements about one’s own good and about the common good that inform and direct one’s present actions”. As MacIntyre says, in order to do this we need to be willing to “assume the other’s point of view, so that the concerns to which we respond... are in fact genuinely theirs”. At the same time, seeing the good of another person does not always mean seeing things as good in just the way she might. Instead, when we ask someone why she behaves as she does, we can aim to draw her attention to something that we believe she has not properly understood or recognised. Suppose that someone (let us call her M) strongly associates her sense of self-worth with her consumer behaviour, which is typified by the purchase of expensive, luxury items. M works longer hours to support her lifestyle, but still frequently finds herself in debt, which makes her feel miserable. Suppose, also, that M has a close friend, S, who is less interested in material acquisition, and who is concerned with her friend’s way of living. As close friends, M and S know much of each other’s life history, and there is mutual affection between them. Observing M’s behaviour, and her predicament, S is understandably concerned, and, after one particularly lavish purchase, decides to confront M about this by asking why buying this new item was so important. The purpose of this confrontation is to help M realise that her current way of living is less rewarding, and that other important things in M’s life are being overlooked or compromised by her excessive
consumption. This challenge is a direct criticism of the worth of certain goods, for S is ultimately asking M to think about the actual worth of the things her lifestyle is currently aimed at, and ways in which their pursuit affects her life.

On this view, reflection on our habits requires us to think about the goodness of the ends that our habits aim at, because it should ultimately be for the sake of these ends that our habits exist. Because we may not realise when our habits have ceased to serve our true interests, the criticism of those who know us well is an invaluable method for bringing our habits back into our awareness, where we are able to re-evaluate the intentions that they express. Although by no means a guarantee of success, a friend’s challenge to the worth of our aims is powerful because of the mutual affection and concern that exists between friends. For, our compulsive spender would have little reason to suppose that her friend is simply being judgemental or malicious, since there is already mutual affection between them. The nature of this relationship also makes it likely that the right kind of tone will be struck by the friend in trying to challenge our compulsive spender’s justifications for her behaviour. We require precisely these kinds of supportive relationships to challenge our reasoning in the right kind of way, and we are thus dependent on others when we fall into bad habits that we find difficult to break on our own. In the example above, M knows what kind of person her friend is, and will listen to her criticism in a different way than we would expect her to listen to a stranger. And if she admires her for having the courage to live her life according to her own beliefs, the advice and criticism that she receives from her would weigh more heavily than if it had come from a stranger, or from someone she did not to admire. Although this sort of social criticism can be conducted in the wrong spirit, for instance without our taking the goods of others genuinely to heart, when it is done in the right spirit, it can be a powerful and effective means of reforming harmful or destructive habits.89

V.

A potentially serious shortcoming of this discussion is that it is rather optimistic about the support we would expect to find in attempting to change problematic consumption behaviours. In the first place, not everyone will be lucky enough to find family or friends around them that can offer this kind of critical support. Moreover, as we have seen, there is considerable social pressure in wealthy nations to conform to expectations of ‘normal’ consumption behaviours. The powerful normativity that is implicit in these conceptions of success and living well implies that we may find little support from those around us in becoming more sparing and thoughtful consumers. However, what I have said here is part of a larger response which clearly must involve some structural measures to alter the background against which excessive consumption behaviours take root.

It should be possible to disincentivise environmentally destructive habits in the same sorts of ways that some governments now try to disincentivise individually and socially harmful habits. Indeed, it is clear that such measures work. For example, consider Australia’s anti-smoking legislation, which through a variety of measures aims to make smoking less attractive to

89 This highlights that some basic goodwill on the part of the listener, a basic commitment to understand what others are telling you, is required for effective social criticism. With family and friends, of course, this is to be expected (and when it is not we are rightly upset). However, on some occasions it can also occur with people we are only acquainted with, as sometimes happens when a conversation arises in which aspects of our lifestyles become relevant.
potential smokers, and to provide motivation and support for addicted smokers to quit smoking. These measures include the first plain packaging legislation in the world, which removes the superficial attraction of brands; strong health warnings on packages, including graphic images of cancers and other health consequences of smoking; substantial public investment in anti-smoking social campaigns; heavy direct taxes on tobacco, including a reduction of duty-free tax concessions; and increased criminal penalties on tobacco smuggling.90

Prior to these changes, cigarette advertising, which had once been ubiquitous, was limited to certain events only, but over time this was steadily reduced until cigarette advertising was finally banned altogether. This was seen to be a crucial aspect of smoking reform because cigarette advertising had always been very successful in linking smoking with certain ‘lifestyle’ aspirations or fantasies; think of the rugged cowboy featured in ‘Marlboro’ advertisements. The justification for these changes was and remains a concern for the impact of smoking on public health.91 What has accompanied this legislation, and is partly a result of public investment in anti-smoking campaigns, is a remarkable degree of normative pressure against smoking from members of the community, who are much less willing to tolerate the presence of smokers than would have been the case in the past. Consequently, rates of smoking have fallen dramatically, and it has also become far less socially acceptable to smoke in Australia.92

However, what seems to be required to create this sort of normative pressure against unsustainable consumption is clearly more far-reaching than what was required in the case of smoking regulation, for here we would be attempting to change much about predominant ways of living, at least in wealthy nations, rather than just one bad habit. As I said above, given that we cannot imagine a world in which the lifestyles of the majority of people in wealthy nations were universalised, there is at the very least a strong prudential reason to disincentivise these trends within each society. Moreover, if lifestyles informed by materialistic conceptions of the good life tend to decrease the quality of our lives, then there are other powerful reasons to disincentivise problematic consumption behaviours among individuals.

These social measures would require persuading people that they can live better by consuming less. In his submission to the UK Sustainable Development Commission in 2003, Jonathan Porritt argued that “people in the rich world must not just consume in more socially and environmentally responsible ways, but must be persuaded to consume less. To bring that about... people who have reached a certain level of material comfort and security can (and should) be persuaded that their future quality of life resides in freeing themselves of the trappings of consumerism and in opting instead for low-maintenance, low-throughput, low-stress patterns of work, recreation and home life”.93 As with smoking regulation, effective

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91 According to the Department of Health, the purpose of the Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992 is to “limit the exposure of the public to messages and images that may persuade people to start or continue smoking or using tobacco products”.
92 The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that between 1991 and 2010, rates of smoking among people aged above 14 years fell by around 40%. Available at: http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4125.0main+features3320Jan%202013
economic and social policy reforms can make it easier for individuals to make these changes to their lifestyles. Although this is not the place to enter into detailed analysis of potential policies, some examples might include: restricting working hours to levels that allow more time for family, friends and recreation, which tend to be sacrificed in our increasingly time-poor age; higher marginal tax rates, such as can be found in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, which are regularly found to be the both the most prosperous, the happiest, and the most equal societies in the world; and luxury or wealth taxes. While these suggestions are by no means exhaustive, the last two would seem particularly suited to disincentivising consumption by narrowing the perceived differences between wealthier and poorer members of society.

I have suggested that individuals themselves have a reason to support attempts to make such changes because the values and aspirations associated with consumer lifestyles are at best marginally important to us, and are at worst positive obstacles to living well. Reflection on what we are aiming at in our consumer behaviour brings into sharp relief the extrinsic nature of these goods, and the precariousness of placing too much importance on such arbitrary and unstable markers of social status or self-worth. But, at the level of the individual, more clear-sighted reflection is one essential part in developing thoughtful habits, and living more genuinely rewarding lives.

References


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What's Wrong with Climate Skeptics? Epistemic Irrationality and the Value of Truth

“What people accept as a justification – shows how they think and live”.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations §325

Introduction

Many think there is something wrong with climate skepticism, beyond merely having false beliefs. We might think that this is because skeptics interpret information about climate change in a biased manner. However, research by social psychologists suggests that, like skeptics, most of us form beliefs that fit with our ideological commitments, rather than on their epistemic merits alone. Indeed, one leading theory claims that ordinary people will necessarily interpret highly specialised information under the influence of bias. In this chapter, I suggest that this cannot be correct, for if it were, all of our true beliefs about scientific matters would be accidentally true. Moreover, I argue that it is not merely that skeptics are improperly biased, but that skeptics ignore the epistemic norms which they rely upon in most other contexts. Further, I argue that implicit in our ordinary practices of truth-seeking and truth-telling are judgements about the value of truth. This allows us to see more clearly what is wrong with climate skepticism, along with other instances of irrational epistemic behaviour. In the final section, I discuss the practical demands of dealing with people like climate skeptics in the short term, where reaching some kind of political consensus is important. But this also raises questions about the adequacy of modern education to equip people with the epistemic skills that modern political participation requires.

I.

At least since 1990, there has been a scientific consensus that climate change is occurring, that it is the result of human behaviour, and that if left unchecked it will be a disaster for future generations of human beings.¹ The accuracy of climate modelling has also greatly improved since 1990. By the time the 2013 IPCC Report was released, the authors expressed ‘very high’ confidence in their findings, and re-iterated their recommendation that immediate action be undertaken in response to this threat.² Although disagreement is a necessary part of ongoing research in any live science, no major scientific institution or national academy of science disputes the IPCC consensus, and only a tiny percentage of peer-reviewed research has even tried to challenge it.³ Despite this, so-called ’climate skeptics’ strongly oppose this consensus

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view. Over the last two decades, skeptics have tried to challenge both the scientific basis of climate change and the policy recommendations for responding to it. And these attempts have been highly successful: skeptics still exert considerable influence in many developed nations, but most notably in the US, Canada, and Australia. Indeed, almost half of the US Congress is now composed of self-confessed skeptics.  

Given the overwhelming scientific consensus that now exists, it may seem remarkable that climate skeptics could be quite so numerous or influential. However, part of the problem seems to be that most of us are not capable of engaging first hand with the science that supports this consensus. Like many other issues, most people are heavily reliant upon the testimony of experts, and especially on reporting of this testimony in the mass media. The prevalence of climate skepticism is more understandable given that the mass media in particular has done a very poor job of reporting climate change. In their seminal work, Boykoff & Boykoff showed that, despite the overwhelming global scientific consensus on the causes of anthropogenic climate change, almost 53% of US media stories about climate change gave equal editorial space to mainstream science and to climate skeptics. This purported attempt to show editorial ‘balance’ has certainly contributed to general confusion about climate change, and has given skeptics a larger platform than their views would otherwise have merited. A recent Gallup Poll showed that only 58% of Americans reported that they worry about climate change either a great deal, or a fair amount, which was significantly lower than polls taken in the mid-2000s. And the authors of the Gallup Poll explicitly attribute responsibility for this result to conservative politicians and climate skeptics.

Now, many people seem to believe that there is something unjustifiable or wrong about climate skepticism, beyond merely being mistaken about the truth of climate change. However, this might initially seem puzzling, for we do not ordinarily register disapproval when someone mistakenly believes a false proposition. Indeed, climate skeptics do not even seem to believe the same false propositions. For instance, one might be skeptical about the scientific consensus that climate change is occurring; one might accept that climate change is occurring, but also that its seriousness is exaggerated; or one might even think that the consequences of climate change will be beneficial. In considering whether this disapproval is justified, it is also important to

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7 The report claims that 'Americans' concerns about global warming peaked at points in the late 1980s and the late 1990s, and again between 2006 and 2008, possibly related to strong environmentalist campaigns to raise awareness of the issue at those times -- including the release of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" in 2006. Conversely, concerns receded in 2009 and 2010, particularly among Republicans and conservatives, corresponding with a flurry of publicity about scientists who doubt global warming is caused by human activities, as well as some controversy about global warming research. With all of this dying down somewhat in the last few years, attitudes are returning to previous levels, putting them near the long-term averages".

8 While each of these positions can be distinct, they often seem to be linked in practice.
distinguish between 'professional' skeptics, who are actually employed to promote climate skepticism, and 'nonprofessional' skeptics, who are not. On the one hand, it is not hard to see why professional skepticism might be ethically dubious. As Oreskes and Conway have shown, professional skeptics are involved in a variety of misinformation campaigns aimed at undermining the credibility of mainstream science. These campaigns include discrediting the link between smoking and cancer, the link between CFCs and ozone depletion, the link between pollution and acid rain, and ultimately the link between the burning of fossil fuels and climate change.\(^9\) And these campaigns succeed by exploiting public ignorance about how scientific findings are reached, and about what legitimate scientific doubt consists in.\(^10\) Indeed, Oreskes and Conway claim that this was the "tobacco industry's key insight: that you could use normal scientific uncertainty to undermine the status of actual scientific knowledge".\(^11\) But, as Oreskes and Conway point out, some of the leading professional skeptics had once been eminent scientists, which meant that they could not have been ignorant about the difference between legitimate scientific doubt and scare-mongering.\(^12\) Whatever their individual motivations, it is hard to deny that these people wilfully aimed to mislead public opinion. Moreover, even if they had deceived themselves into actually believing their own claims, this would still not be an excuse. As former scientists, they can be expected to know how to properly challenge scientific claims, and thus to recognise the difference between legitimate and illegitimate doubt.

But it is not clear that this intuition should also apply to ordinary, nonprofessional skeptics. In the first place, there is no role-specific reason to think that ordinary people ought to understand how scientific research proceeds. An ordinary skeptic might just be ignorant of how science generally works, but not culpably so. According to Aristotle, ignorance is culpable when one really should have known what one was ignorant of; he gives the example of being able to distinguish between good and bad behaviour, and says that not knowing about these concepts is not an excuse for acting badly.\(^13\) But, while it is plausible that one really should have a basic grasp of good and bad behaviour, it does not seem to be similarly culpable to fail to have a basic understanding of the scientific method.

An obvious place to begin our discussion is with the suggestion that climate skeptics allow their own moral and political beliefs to unduly influence them. That is, although skeptics are presented with adequate information about climate change, their moral and political beliefs distort their assessments of this information, and of those who produce it. Thus, climate skeptics are skeptical in response to objects of information, or experts, that they really have good reasons to take seriously. This amounts to a charge of bias: climate skeptics are disposed to disbelieve what they hear about climate change from mainstream scientists, to selectively

\(^10\) Oreskes and Conway cite a 'doubt-inducing handbook', written by the US Tobacco Industry, which was then used by those opposing environmental regulation in case of CFCs, acid rain, and climate change. Called *Bad Science*, this volume contained 'over two hundred pages of snappy quotes and reprinted editorials, articles, and op-ed pieces that challenged the authority and integrity of science, building to a crescendo in the attack on the EPA's work on secondhand smoke. It also included a list of experts with scientific credentials available to comment on any issue about which a think tank or corporation needed a negative sound bite'. See ibid., 144.
\(^11\) Ibid., 34.
\(^12\) Ibid., 189.
\(^13\) See Aristotle’s discussion of voluntariness in Book III of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. 
interpret what they take to be ambiguities in their findings, and even to claim that there is a conspiracy afoot when faced with an overwhelming scientific consensus.

But even if this is true, it is still not clear that we are justified in disapproving of climate skeptics on this basis. For a great deal of psychological research now suggests that most people are very poor interpreters of information, and poor judges of the trustworthiness of experts. Overwhelmingly, the view is that our values are the distorting force upon our epistemic behaviour. According to perhaps the most prominent current theory, Dan Kahan’s ‘Cultural Cognition’ view, many of us interpret information in a way that is favourable to our particular worldviews. Like climate skeptics, we seem to be incredibly poor interpreters of both scientific information and scientific expertise. Moreover, like skeptics, we seem to form beliefs not only on their epistemic merits, but on the basis of their potential ‘fit’ with a particular worldview. This uncomfortable conclusion suggests that we are far more similar to climate skeptics than we might have supposed. Indeed, proponents of this theory even suggest that ordinary people cannot get beyond selective interpretation and bias. But if ordinary people are somehow unable to interpret information on its epistemic merits, or to judge trustworthy from untrustworthy experts, then it is hard to see what could justify our ethical disapproval.

II.

Kahan’s ‘Cultural Cognition’ theory might be summarised (with apologies to Hume) as the view that our epistemic behaviour is the ‘slave of the passions’: strong beliefs about human nature, society, and the world shape our assessments of the likely consequences of disputed social policies, and of the trustworthiness of putative experts. These ‘cultural’ beliefs, as Kahan calls them, are thought to come before any facts about a problem: “[n]ormatively, culture might be prior to facts in the sense that cultural values determine what significance individuals attach to the consequences of environmental regulation, gun control, drug criminalization, and the like. But more importantly, culture is cognitively prior to facts in the sense that cultural values shape what individuals believe the consequences of such policies to be. Individuals selectively credit and dismiss factual claims in a manner that supports their preferred vision of the good society”.

Kahan’s theory is based on the work of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, which analysed the perception of environmental and technological risks in terms of egalitarian, hierarchical, individualistic, and communitarian worldviews. In a range of recent studies, Kahan and his associates found that these worldviews were highly reliable predictors of beliefs about the seriousness of potential environmental risks. For instance, people identified as egalitarians

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16 Ibid., 1083.
are “naturally sensitive to environmental hazards, the abatements of which justifies regulating commercial activities that produce social inequality”. However, individualists “predictably dismiss claims of environmental risk as specious, in line with their commitment to the autonomy of markets and other private orderings”, while hierarchists “are similarly sceptical because they perceive warnings of imminent environmental catastrophe as threatening the competence of social and governmental elites”. Overall, this theory claims that “individuals adopt stances toward risks that express their commitment to particular ways of life... which activities individuals view as dangerous and which policies they view as effective embody coherent visions of social justice and individual virtue”.

In one recent application of this theory, Kahan et al. tested whether worldviews would reliably predict the interpretation of information about risks transmitted by experts. Respondents were presented with risk assessments about the severity of threats posed by climate change, nuclear waste disposal, and handgun regulation, by a series of mock experts supposedly affiliated with elite universities and government agencies. The results showed a “strong correlation between individuals’ cultural values and their perceptions of scientific consensus on risks known to divide persons of opposing worldviews”. Further, people seemed not to disagree in a random or unpredictable way: “[w]hen asked to evaluate whether an individual of elite academic credentials... was a ‘knowledgeable and trustworthy expert’, subjects’ answers proved conditional on the fit between the position the putative expert was depicted as adopting and the position associated with the subjects’ cultural outlooks”, Kahan et al. conclude that “[i]ndividuals systematically overestimate the degree of scientific support for positions they are culturally predisposed to accept as a result of a cultural availability effect that influences how readily they can recall instances of expert endorsement of those positions”.

This and other similar research bears out the commonsense thought that our biases affect our ability to accurately interpret information about threats, and to recognise trustworthy experts. But if our values did not play some kind of biasing role, then we would expect people’s opinions about such issues to be either “randomly distributed across the population or to be correlated with education”. Instead of this, we find regular, predictable oppositions between partisan groups in society. If these issues were purely debates about the epistemic status of our information, we would not be able to explain how disagreements about the status of factual beliefs end up correlated with these apparently unrelated partisan divisions. As Kahan says, “[c]ognitive-dissonance avoidance will steel individuals to resist empirical data that either threatens practices they revere or bolsters ones they despise, particularly when accepting such data would force them to disagree with individuals they respect”.

(2011); Kahan et al., "Fear of Democracy: A Cultural Evaluation of Sunstein on Risk." These studies assess risk perceptions of a range of social and environmental problems.

20 Ibid., 1084.
21 Ibid., 1088. Emphasis original.
22 Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman, "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus."
23 Ibid., 167.
24 Ibid.
26 Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman, "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus," 163. According to the authors, the "cultural judgments embedded in affect will speak more authoritatively than contrary data as
However, despite its merits, Kahan’s theory seems to prove too much because it also claims that non-experts will necessarily be unable to interpret the testimony of experts without distorting biases. Kahan et al. claim that “what most scientists believe is simply another empirical fact no different from any other that bears on a disputed question of risk. As such, scientific consensus cannot be expected to counteract the polarizing effects of cultural cognition because apprehension of it will necessarily occur through the same social psychological mechanisms that shape individuals’ perceptions of every other manner of fact”. But if our ability to identify the relevant experts or to locate and understand salient information depends on our evaluative motivations, then it would be entirely by accident that we ever happened to get accurate information about a potential threat. Now, it is not obvious that this rather extreme epistemic pessimism is even empirically warranted. But even so, such a view seems to leave no room for the non-accidental knowledge of experts. For if we all begin from evaluative presuppositions, and interpret information in their light, then how can we make sense of the scientific consensus about climate change? For defenders of this theory, it remains an unexplained puzzle how experts could manage to avoid a form of biased cognition that necessarily affects everyone else around them.

Some of these difficulties can be traced to a particularly naive picture of the relationship between a person’s evaluative commitments and her factual beliefs. As we saw, it was claimed that values are ‘prior’ to facts. But this seems to present us with a static picture where we start with an evaluative premise such as ‘I believe that big government is a bad thing’, and from this we interpret information about the seriousness of a threat while motivated by this belief, for instance ‘gun control is a bad thing, because it involves excessive regulation’, and so: ‘information showing a positive correlation between gun ownership and gun violence must be incorrect or misleading’. But nothing in this theory explains why we should accept such a view of reasoning from ‘evaluative’ to ‘factual’ beliefs. This view of reasoning is merely a framing assumption, which no direct evidence or argument appears to support. But if we ask where and when a so-called evaluative belief is to originate, and what support it may have drawn on before it is accepted, this kind of view becomes highly implausible. For it is an important fact of experience that people sometimes change their minds about what they take to be true because they find better supporting reasons or evidence. And such changes also sometimes affect one’s moral and political beliefs, as even a cursory glance at the change in social attitudes during the previous century would show. Consider, for instance, how faulty empirical beliefs about the inherent differences between men and women, or between different racial groups, gave way under pressure from scientific research, and how these new factual beliefs accompanied

individuals’ gauge what practices are dangerous and what practices are not. And the culturally partisan foundation of trust will make them dismiss contrary data as unreliable if they perceive that it originates from persons who don’t harbour their own cultural commitments”.

27 Ibid., 150. Emphasis original.

28 For instance, Kahan et al. claim that more scientifically literate people tend to be less concerned about climate change than those who are less scientifically literate. See "The Polarizing Impact of Science Literacy and Numeracy on Perceived Climate Change Risks," *Nature Climate Change* 2, no. 10 (2012). For an alternative interpretation of these findings, see Sophie Guy et al., "Investigating the Effects of Knowledge and Ideology on Climate Change Beliefs," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 5 (2014). Guy et al. claim that this result obscures the influence of specific knowledge about climate change, which instead appears to encourage a more accurate assessment of this threat.
changes in cultural values. But, because these changes would apparently be impossible, we naturally suspect that something is missing from this theory.\textsuperscript{29}

Moreover, as Simon Keller has pointed out, a further implication of ‘Cultural Cognition’ is that climate skeptics, and others who interpret information under the influence of strong biases, become totally non-rational: that is, they are not skeptical about climate change because of the balance of available reasons, but because of non-rational features of themselves.\textsuperscript{30} As Keller says, they might be skeptics because they are too lazy to do any serious investigation of their own; they might be ideologically opposed to mainstream science, perhaps because it relies on the testimony of others, or perhaps because they prefer the judgement of their trusted religious leaders or media commentators; they might even have a vested interest in fossil fuel companies. But none of these explanations is supported by reasons pertaining to the truth of climate change. And this seems to make climate skepticism "a result of a rejection of the responsible search for truth".\textsuperscript{31} Skeptics, Keller claims, are "made to look like people who care more about their own interests and their own dogmatic ideological commitments than they do about whether the Earth really is undergoing damaging change".\textsuperscript{32}

But even if climate skeptics are unduly influenced by ideological bias in considering whether climate change is true, this analysis on its own does not show what is epistemically deficient about such behaviour. This is because deficiency itself requires the possibility of getting something right; but, as we saw, Kahan and his associates believe that non-experts will necessarily be unable to interpret scientific information without undue bias. If there is no possibility of forming justified beliefs, then skeptics apparently do nothing wrong in selectively interpreting this information. However, this conclusion seems to be self-defeating, for it makes it hard to understand how an expert consensus could ever have been reached. But failures of epistemic rationality, even if they are widespread, clearly do not show that there really are no rational standards available for justifying beliefs. The pessimism about this implicit in the theory of ‘Cultural Cognition’ thus appears to be an unwarranted generalisation of the available evidence. All the same, it remains to be seen what general epistemic standards there could be, and whether climate skeptics in particular are guilty of ignoring them.

\textbf{III.}

Keller responds to the view of climate skepticism implicit above by denying that skeptics are epistemically irrational. Although Keller agrees that the influence of ideology explains why some people respond to information about climate change with suspicion, he claims that from such a perspective it can be rational to be skeptical about climate change. Keller writes: "[t]he climate change sceptic might be wrong. Her ideological starting point might be misguided. But her move

\textsuperscript{29} One might like to raise the problem of underdetermination at this point. For, as is the case with all scientific theories, theories about cognitive bias and motivated interpretation are underdetermined by the evidence on which those theories is based. The classic treatment of the problem of underdetermination in science is Pierre Duhem’s \textit{The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory}; Foreword by Prince Louis De Broglie; Translated from the French by Philip P. Wiener (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954). Duhem believed underdetermination to be a potentially serious problem only for confirming theories of physics. However, Quine argued influentially that all types of knowledge claims face the same problems, and famously advocated a ‘holistic’ account of epistemology. See "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in \textit{From a Logical Point of View} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

\textsuperscript{30} Keller, "Empathising with Climate Skepticism."

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.Keller.
from her ideological starting point to her scepticism about climate change is a move that makes sense, from her own point of view. It need not be a result of laziness and selfishness, or wilful ignorance of the science, or brainwashing by corporations and right-wing politicians. *It could be a result of an ordinary person doing her best to form true beliefs, within a certain social context and beginning from a certain ideological framework*.33

According to Keller, the best solution to political disagreement about climate change would be to try to "take ideology out of the debate", by making it "clear that the question of what to do about climate change if it exists is in principle independent of the question about whether climate change does exist". Thus, we should try to show "how the thesis of anthropogenic climate change, if correct, would fit in with a greater variety of ideological perspectives". Indeed, Keller claims that there is "nothing inconsistent, after all, about believing that if climate change is real then the best thing to do, all things considered, is just to let it happen, or to adapt rather than mitigate, or to try to confront it by using technology to further manipulate the climate".

But I doubt it is really possible to accept that climate change is happening, that it will be a great threat to current and future generations, but that ultimately it is best to do nothing about it. Suppose that what we mean by "best", and "all things considered" here is something like 'bringing about the most good by the most efficient use of resources', where 'good' means something like fundamental human interests or capabilities. Something like this argument has indeed been made by Bjorn Lomborg, who argued that we should hold off from climate change mitigation and other kinds of compensation, because the opportunity cost of adapting in the future will be far less than it is at present, and because there are more pressing concerns, such as poverty, which could be addressed in the meantime.34

However, there are decisive reasons to reject this argument. As Simon Caney has pointed out, such a view simply assumes that increasing economic growth now will actually enable future generations to adapt to climate change.35 But this is implausible because we have imperfect knowledge of when and where a climate change impact will occur, and so we would be forced to use our increased resources to react to disasters rather than to minimise their severity through prevention. Effective adaptation also requires accountability and responsiveness from governing institutions, but increased wealth alone will not improve unaccountable or corrupt institutions. Indeed, increased wealth may even subvert adaptation by future generations, because there is no assurance that this wealth will be fairly distributed. And if it is not, as Caney says, we would require "an act of faith to think that the rich will be motivated to spend these resources enabling the global poor to adapt".36

This argument also simply assumes that any loss can be compensated by the addition of another good as a substitute. But if individuals have a fundamental right to a decent, liveable environment, then violating these rights now with an intention to compensate later would still

33 Ibid. Emphasis added.
36 Ibid., 80.
be wrong.\textsuperscript{37} It is also highly implausible to maintain that all goods are substitutable. Consider the case of Pacific Island nations such as Tuvalu, which are in danger of disappearing under rising seas. What adequate compensation could there be for the permanent loss of one’s nation? It is therefore highly problematic and implausible to recognise the threat posed by climate change, but to urge deferring any response to some unspecified point in the future. If there is a strong consensus that present inaction will result in a worse outcome for future human beings, then it is clear that such a path could not even be a plausible candidate for counting as the best thing to do.

Moreover, Keller’s claim that climate skepticism is subjectively rational overlooks the point that epistemic justification is not merely a subjective (or individual) affair. This confusion follows from another mistaken assumption in Keller’s discussion. Keller claims that because neither the climate skeptic nor the ‘believer’ is capable of interpreting the science directly, both must try to explain why his view is more plausible via the testimony of reliable experts. But Keller claims that this appears insoluble, since “an argument about whom to trust is difficult to win”.\textsuperscript{38} However, as a general claim, this is false. Our reliance on experts is just another form of a totally general reliance on information which comes to us via the testimony of others, which we do not ordinarily consider to be problematic, even though most of what we learn via testimony is well beyond our ability to directly verify.\textsuperscript{39} And in most ordinary situations, we are fairly good at determining which sources of testimony we should trust. For instance, when I go to the doctor and relay my symptoms, I afford a certain credibility to her judgement because I am asking someone I consider to be well-placed enough to provide me with a good diagnosis. However, if I asked an electrician about these same symptoms, I would not ordinarily assign the same level of credibility to his answer. Of course, there might be possible instances where this trust will be misplaced. But this does not undermine the fact that characteristically, we would trust the doctor over the electrician because one of these figures is considered to have more relevant expertise in giving medical diagnoses than the other.

Judgements of this sort are both generally accurate and indispensable in everyday life, given the practical limitations on our time and cognitive abilities. Lorraine Code argues that “[o]ne of the most significant aspects of being a member of a community of knowledge is that one can, as a matter of course, draw upon a reservoir of largely unarticulated assumptions about other people’s knowledge. In most of our everyday cognitive activities and expectations, we tacitly assume that testimony, broadly construed, is sound and reliable”.\textsuperscript{40} As Code points out, if this were not the case, if for instance we could not trust that the labels on bottles indicated their true contents rather than disguising a poison, it is difficult to imagine how human society could have developed in the first place.\textsuperscript{41} The pervasiveness of our trust in sources of testimony is also


\textsuperscript{38} Keller, “Empathising with Climate Skepticism.”


\textsuperscript{41} As Code remarks, “[t]he assumption that other persons are creatures like ourselves who approach the world and know it as we do clearly makes seeking information from them... a practice upon which we quite naturally embark. That we naturally seek information from others... is a fact about basic
revealed when we realise that it has been misplaced in a particular instance. As Code suggests, the shock we experience when our trust is on occasion violated "makes us realize how deep-rooted our expectations in fact are. Trust in these matters shapes epistemic communities and binds their members together". 42

Keller's assertion is not true even in the case of disagreement between climate skeptics and 'believers'. Despite our obvious reliance on the testimony of scientific experts, there are fairly straightforward ways of assessing the trustworthiness of scientific experts, which build on the familiar epistemic behaviour that we all engage in within a community of shared knowledge, and in which we are all dependent on the epistemic behaviour of others for much of what we take to be true. David Coady & Richard Corry point out that expert consensus is itself typically a strong reason in favour of believing something, because experts are typically excellent judges of other experts. 43 Coady and Corry argue that experts are typically able to "recognize which experts are most likely to have correct opinions about a given issue, and come to share those opinions for that reason. When they do that, it is evidence, from a lay perspective, that the opinions in question are correct". 44 Of course, in the case of climate skepticism part of the difficulty is that many seem to have been convinced that the experts disagree. 45 But because there is merely a semblance of expert disagreement here, rather than genuine disagreement, we do not need to become experts in our own right in order to work out which claims we should believe. Instead, as Coady and Corry suggest, we need to become 'meta-experts', or experts about who the experts are. 46 And expert consensus must be regarded as significant here, because many experts will be our surest epistemic guides in trying to work out who is considered an expert by fellow experts. Thus, Coady and Corry claim that "[t]he more experts and meta-experts (often the same people) who attest to a view, and the fewer who deny it, the more reason laypeople have to accept it". 47

Moreover, non-experts also seem capable of forming judgements of their own about the trustworthiness of experts, by examining the context in which a body of research develops, and by looking for signs of hidden agendas or vested interests. 48 Another consideration would be to look for historical precedents in a field of research, by which we might indirectly assess present reliability. For if a field of research undergoes dramatic shifts in consensus fairly regularly, then

possibilities and fundamental preconditions of knowledge. Human beings come into existence and begin and continue to acquire knowledge in and through social interaction". Ibid., 192.

42 Ibid., 172. Although it is true that some kinds of knowledge do not depend on an epistemic community in this way (for instance, a perception such as the darkness of a room when a light is turned off), Code (p. 178) maintains that knowledge "in any significant sense of the word, together with the lies and deceptions parasitic upon it, presupposes community".


44 Ibid., 28.

45 But if so, we would have to rely on our own non-expert judgement in deciding whom to believe. And as Coady & Corry (p. 24) note, this worry appears to be "particularly acute in the climate change debate, given that the Earth's atmosphere is such a vast and complex entity and the science, especially the physics, most relevant to understanding it is largely expressed in the esoteric language of higher mathematics".

46 Coady and Corry (p. 27) distinguish between experts and meta-experts as follows: an expert in some field is "someone exceptionally well-informed about it", while a meta-expert in some field is "someone who is exceptionally well-informed about who is exceptionally well-informed about it".


48 Ibid.
some skepticism might be warranted about the reliability of present claims. Another ordinary epistemic consideration we can use in determining whom to trust would be to ask whether there are external motivations at work, for when we detect a vested interest we are justifiably more skeptical about the truth of a particular claim. For instance, consider how we would differentiate between the trustworthiness of information about the nutritional content of a food given to us by a consumer watchdog, and information released by a marketing firm encouraging us to buy it. Similarly, if apparent climate change experts are connected with vested interests such as the fossil fuel lobby, we would be justified in being more skeptical about their claims. Indeed, Elizabeth Anderson has provided an extensive list of criteria which lay people can make effective use of in assessing the trustworthiness of scientific experts, and their testimony on the nature, causes and severity of climate change. And Anderson argues convincingly that none of these criteria is conceptually beyond the ability of an average, high-school educated person to apply: a basic Google search of ‘climate change’ directs one to Wikipedia’s unambiguous but conservative pages summarising the mainstream scientific consensus on the nature, causes, and severity of climate change, as well as the misinformation campaigns of prominent climate skeptics.

These are just some of the considerations which we make use of in determining whom to trust, which we learn as members of epistemic communities. Because knowledge-seeking is an activity grounded in a wider community of inquirers, we learn to tell good from poor sources of information, and to judge good from dubious sources of testimony using the epistemic standards which we are taught as children, and which we reflect on and potentially modify as adults. For, from the fact that human societies exist with large bodies of shared knowledge, we must infer that a great deal of our ordinary epistemic behaviour is generally accurate and reliable. As Wittgenstein reminds us in the case of learning a language, this is a point which follows from noticing just how much is presupposed by a shared form of life. Given the place of information-gathering, even of the most mundane sort, in human life, and the fact that human societies always possess a great deal of accurate information about many things, including material facts about their surroundings and social facts about themselves, it would be wrong to conclude on the basis of some deviant behaviour that there were no standards for correctness at all, however widespread this appeared to be. And it would also be wrong to conclude that arguments about the trustworthiness of experts are generally difficult to win. When one arises, we look to the standards recognised by members of our epistemic community. And when we make a judgement about the plausibility of the testimony of an expert, we refer to the wider social context upon which this expert’s claims are based. Climate skeptics cannot just selectively ignore epistemic standards which they are otherwise quite happy to rely upon. Nor can they rely upon overly idiosyncratic judgements about who is an expert in one area while failing to do this across the board without being irrational. Climate skepticism thus ignores the backdrop of shared belief and the shared standards we use in assessing information (whether directly or

49 However, caution is needed here, for this is one avenue that skeptics have exploited in order to cast doubt about the findings of scientists in a range of cases, from the link between tobacco smoking and cancer to climate change. See Oreskes and Conway, Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming, esp. Ch. 1.
mediated via experts), upon which our epistemic communities are formed. Indeed, it is only against such a backdrop that this skepticism can even be intelligible. The ‘community’ of climate skeptics is thus parasitic on this larger epistemic community, whose epistemic standards they cannot just selectively ignore.

IV.

If the argument to this point is correct, then climate skepticism is irrational because skeptics selectively ignore epistemic standards that they ordinarily rely upon. But even so, it may not be clear why this deserves to attract ethical disapproval. One thought is that it might matter what one’s belief is about. Consider the difference between two beliefs that are the product of biased cognition: for instance, J’s favourite football player appears to have been caught cheating, but J forms the belief that the player has been set up. Let us suppose that this player really was engaged in cheating. J has a false belief about this player’s culpability, a belief he formed under the influence of a strong preference for his favourite team, and its players. Now consider another case in which the ruling political party in J’s nation appears to have been involved in corrupt practices. As it happens, J shares many of the values of his political leaders, and is generally favourably disposed to them. Consequently, he is inclined to be skeptical about claims that they engaged in wrongdoing. Let us suppose, again, that this belief is false: J’s political leaders were indeed engaged in corrupt practices. Now, if we are inclined to think that the second false belief is more problematic than the first, this seems to be because the second belief is about something of more significance.

This echoes a view held by some philosophers, who use the threat of being implicated in morally objectionable practices to motivate good epistemic behaviour. Thus, according to Steven Sverdlik’s account of culpable negligence, a person is culpably negligent in holding a belief when his beliefs might feasibly contribute to an outcome that would be morally objectionable. To make this view plausible, Sverdlik must concede that we must have had, at some prior time, the opportunity to consider this possible violation of our moral norms. Kathie Jenni adds the proviso that a person ought to investigate potential violations of his moral values when he has some influence over their potential occurrence, and when he also believes that such an outcome is happening or is likely to happen. A conscientious person, on this sort of view, reflects on potential moral violations, and the contributions that his beliefs may make to their occurrence, and this recognition should prompt more care in the formation of his beliefs. Along these lines, Daniel Fouke has recently argued that the epistemic practice of climate skeptics should be assessed in terms of the scale of the problem that they have mistaken beliefs about. Fouke claims that “[c]arelessly formed environmental beliefs lead to risky policies and risky inaction”. That is, by carelessly forming beliefs about environmental problems, and by implication, other problems of a similar scale, I am making it more likely that no collective response will occur. Thus, if my belief is about something potentially very serious, then the epistemic standards that I should apply would need to be more rigorous. In this way, the cost of being wrong should partly determine how careful I need to be in forming beliefs.

53 Ibid., 142.
56 Ibid., 134.
While there is something to be said for this kind of argument, appealing directly to potential problems might actually encourage deliberate avoidance of information when there is even a hint that something is ethically amiss. As Jason Kawall points out, those who want to shirk moral demands would be quite prepared to consciously avoid potentially troubling information. Even if this conscious avoidance would be a symptom of some kind of self-deception, it seems that we cannot simply advert to an individual's own judgement of whether something morally objectionable might occur. As we saw above, one of the key claims of 'Cultural Cognition' is that assessments of potential risks are thoroughly conditioned by our values. Thus, a person with certain values will not consider some risks to require careful consideration, because he does not think that there is much chance they will occur. An assessment of this risk by others will only register with him, then, if these others appear to share his values. As above, the issue here arises from tying epistemic and ethical considerations too closely to the subjective judgement of the individual.

As I said at the outset, it seems implausible to hold that people should know particular pieces of information in the same way that a person should know how to distinguish good from bad behaviour in the most ordinary sense. The latter requirement is usually strengthened to include the idea that any person will, as a result of this upbringing, have also developed certain dispositions to aim at doing what are conventionally recognised to be good things, and to avoid doing bad things. Thus, Aristotle suggests that by doing good things often enough we come to recognise how to act well in a variety of seemingly different situations, and feel a certain way about our action. The result of this ongoing education and practice is the development of certain virtues of character, such as generosity, courage, or justice.

But there is an epistemic analogue to this, which is that we also develop certain dispositions towards truth-telling and truth-seeking, as a result of belonging to communities that value truth and knowledge. As Aristotle says, “[a]ll men naturally desire knowledge. An indication of this is our esteem for the senses; for apart from their use we esteem them for their own sake, and most of all the sense of sight… [since] of all the senses sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions“. Our curiosity to know about all sorts of things, from information about other species, the histories of past civilisations, to aspects of ourselves, is apparent everywhere, and is one of the most defining features of human beings. As children, we are encouraged not only to learn a body of information but to question how and why things are so. And from childhood on, we are encouraged to view truth, and those who seek it, as admirable, and to criticise those who are uninterested in it or who actively oppose it. Moreover, we continue to praise people that we judge to have these admirable qualities throughout our lives. Consider the range of institutions and social awards that are granted to those judged to have significantly contributed to the furthering of human knowledge, most famous of which is the Nobel prize; there is an almost automatic evaluation of such people as admirable and worthy of emulation, and these qualities are just what we attempt to inculcate in school children.

58 Aristotle, The Metaphysics; with an English Translation by Hugh Tredennick, ed. G. Cyril Armstrong (London : New York: William Heinemann, ltd.; G. P. Putnam's sons, 1933), I. 980a22-28. Aristotle, In Twenty-Three Volumes XVII: Metaphysics, trs. Hugh Tredennick, I. 980a22-28. Indeed, there is a strong etymological link between seeing and knowing in ancient Greek, where the common verb for knowing, eidenai, is connected to the word eidos, meaning a 'form', or 'that which is seen'.

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We can also come to see the practical benefit of belonging to a community of truth-seekers, by realising that our own practical interests require us to have largely true beliefs, but which we mostly depend on others to provide for us. Indeed, as Elizabeth Anscombe pointed out concerning the practice of promising, some practices are so central to human life that we cannot imagine how it would be without them.\(^{59}\) For this reason, Anscombe calls promising an ‘Aristotelian necessity’: it is something without which human good cannot come about, either for the individual or for the community to which she belongs.\(^{60}\) Epistemic practices aimed at the truth, and the dispositions that we form as the result of them, are indispensable in just this way, and even more fundamentally so. Some might object at the sight of deception, but this obscures the point that deception could not occur if we did not generally expect people to tell us what they sincerely believe to be true. When internalised by an individual, this necessity takes the form of a set of dispositions aimed at seeking truth and avoiding error, and aimed at passing truth onto others.

Perhaps the most familiar example of such a disposition is honesty. Just think how radically different human life would be if we assumed that most people would typically be dishonest and untrustworthy, rather than merely some people some of the time. Indeed, we consider honesty to be both an epistemic and an ethical quality.\(^{61}\) An honest person is someone who not only sincerely discloses what he believes to be the truth; he also avoids engaging in ethically dishonest conduct, such as lying to obtain some sort of personal advantage. This point should be obvious given that lying is generally subject to ethical disapproval. We do not merely care that we have been lied to because an untrue claim has been advanced (although, in particular contexts this may be much more directly in view). Typically, we also regard lying as an ethical failure: someone has intentionally tried to mislead us about the truth, encouraging us instead to form false beliefs.\(^{62}\) Again, depending upon the nature of the truth claim, this can be a very serious ethical transgression. Moreover, consider how we might regard a person who has undergone an upbringing in which he had been encouraged to seek the truth, but who is now characteristically inattentive to important pieces of freely available information, and is content to selectively interpret the information that does cross his path.

We have a variety of ethically inflected descriptions for someone like this: we might say such a person is narrow-minded, dogmatic, a bigot, myopic, or even simply ignorant. And, as with the dishonest person, these are both epistemic and ethical descriptions. Because we already presuppose this kind of general normative orientation towards truth-telling and truth-seeking, we should indeed say that climate skepticism is ethically deficient because it displays a character that we have good reasons not to value. And this is still the case even though skeptics are not alone in deserving such criticism. For, not only are there established norms of epistemic justification underlying our ordinary epistemic practice, but also ethical norms concerning truth-telling and truth-seeking, both of which seem fundamental to our form of life.


\(^{60}\) Aristotle makes this argument in Physics Bk. VIII.

\(^{61}\) For this point, see James Montmarquet’s Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1993).

\(^{62}\) Although how strong this failure is, and how greatly we should seek to avoid lying, is not clear from this practice alone. Kant is most famous for objecting to lying at any time for any reason whatsoever. But the contrary view has perhaps an even longer philosophical pedigree. For instance, consider the ‘noble lie’ which Plato’s philosopher-kings must tell in order to preserve the ideal republic.
V.

Despite what we have said to this point, there is a further practical question to ask concerning what might be done in response to these difficulties. For although we might be justified in disapproving of skeptics and others whose biases selectively interfere with their epistemic practice, we cannot simply ignore such people. Of course, there are limits to what one can expect in a conversation with a truly irrational opponent. But we need not assume that most ordinary climate skeptics do not care about the truth in general, even if they appear to have little regard for it in this particular case. As we have seen, most people also have strong evaluative beliefs about truth-telling and truth-seeking. If we assume this, common ground may eventually be found, even if the means we must make use of in arriving there need to be indirect.

It is certainly possible for people with different values to reach similar practical conclusions, even if these will be supported by different reasons. Proponents of the 'Cultural Cognition' view have plausibly suggested that policy-makers attempt to communicate both the aims and the justifications of particular policies in terms that are likely to appeal to multiple evaluative standpoints or worldviews. One strategy suggested is 'identity affirmation': individuals are more likely to respond open-mindedly to information about the threat posed by climate change if this "in fact supports or is consistent with a conclusion that affirms their cultural values". Therefore, because some people will be more open to information about the threat posed by climate change if they are also told that, say, nuclear power generation is one viable response, it may be a good idea in practice to communicate in these terms. A second strategy would be to make use of 'pluralistic advocacy'. That is, although people are likely to reject information presented by experts whose values they do not share, there is evidence that some people will nonetheless respond well "if they perceive that there are experts of diverse values on both sides of the debate". Given the ongoing difficulties that many nations have had in reaching a political consensus for strong action on climate change, these sorts of practical responses are likely to be invaluable.

There is also a longer-term question raised by the phenomenon of climate skepticism, and all similar kinds of epistemic irrationality. For these responses appear to be a symptom of the broader failure to develop the epistemic traits needed to function well in the modern world. On the one hand, it is clear that our age is more epistemically demanding than any previous era: just by existing as a member of a modern society, we are exposed to an incredible volume of potential knowledge claims, which apparently call upon us to make judgements of their plausibility or trustworthiness all the time. For instance, just consider how modern newspapers...

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65 A recent example of this approach is the Breakthrough Institute, a research institute championing new technologies and increased economic development in response to the threat posed by climate change and biodiversity loss. See http://www.thebreakthrough.org/
and modern news TV programs now update every few minutes, advancing claims about what is happening in the world, and why. Of course, having false beliefs about most of these things will be practically harmless most of the time. But the example of climate change shows that, at least sometimes, both what we believe, and the ways in which we form our beliefs, can matter a great deal.

John Dewey is perhaps the first philosopher to emphasise the challenges that a more epistemically demanding world might place on us. Dewey recognised that the modern world, and in particular, the growth of science, had revolutionised the way in which human societies functioned. Dewey also understood that it was inconceivable for this revolution not to dramatically affect both the substance and the methods of modern education. However, Dewey argued that education was at his time still stuck with a “mediaeval” conception of education as the learning of a great stock of revered facts from a source of authority. Dewey claimed that the problem with this was that it fostered the expectation that “others, the book or the teacher, will supply solutions ready-made, instead of giving material that the student has to adapt and apply to the question in hand for himself.”

Dewey argued that the most important thing for modern educators would be to encourage critical, reflective thinking. For, as Dewey says, “[n] one doubts, theoretically, the importance of fostering in school good habits of thinking. But... there is not adequate theoretical recognition that all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned... is to develop their ability to think. The parceling out of instruction among various ends such as acquisition of skill (in reading, spelling, writing, drawing, reciting); acquiring information (in history and geography), and training of thinking is a measure of the ineffective way in which we accomplish all three”. From this perspective, an education that does not result in comprehensive, reflective thinking can be regarded as a failure to develop the mental qualities necessary to understand the modern world. As Dewey says, the “sole direct path to enduring improvement in the methods of instruction and learning consists in centering upon the conditions which exact, promote, and test thinking”. And Dewey also recognised that, in an age characterised by science, failing to respond well to complex information would undermine our ability to function well as democratic citizens. Dewey claimed that a good citizen must enable one to “judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as obeying laws”. However, without an appropriate education, we would lack precisely those qualities of mind that enable us to understand the empirical backdrop of the most important issues of our time. Although education has improved greatly since Dewey’s time, the prevalence of climate skepticism and other epistemically irrational responses is an indication that our ways

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69 *Democracy and Education* p. 164.

70 Ibid, p. 159.

71 In *How We Think*, Dewey (p. 136) writes: “What can be done, however, is to cultivate those attitudes that are favorable to the use of the best methods of inquiry and testing. Knowledge of the methods alone will not suffice; there must be the desire, the will, to employ them”.

72 *Democracy and Education*, p. 159.

of educating people to cope with the epistemic demands of modern life are presently inadequate.

Nonetheless, while it is true that science is now so complex and specialised that it is impossible for a single person to be a general scientific expert, as I have argued above, this does not mean that it is impossible to form reasonable beliefs about what is likely to be true. Even if this is sometimes difficult, when we succumb to our biases in determining what to believe, we fail to live up to our own epistemic and ethical standards. And we can rightly hold one another accountable for this.

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Self-Deception, Illusion, and Climate Change

"Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it".

- Mark Twain

Introduction

The response of many people to climate change seems perplexing. While most people know that the consequences of a warmer world are likely to be dire, they do almost nothing to prevent it. In this chapter, I claim that this tension is resolved through self-deception: by distancing ourselves from what we know about climate change, we undermine our motivation to respond. However, the result of this is a kind of ignorance about ourselves, for we continue to believe that we are the sorts of people who act on what we believe to be right, even in the face of contradictory evidence. Indeed, this suggests that self-deception is primarily an existential condition of delusion or ignorance about the self. Second, I claim that while fostering illusions about ourselves can be benign or even beneficial, this can also be seriously problematic. One such case is when our self-deception enables us to ignore evidence that we are failing to live up to our own ethical beliefs. I suggest that this is just what is occurring in response to climate change: we fail to respond to this threat, but we do not recognise what this response reveals about us as people. Moreover, I argue that by considering how future generations will judge us, we can see how this self-deception risks severely tarnishing evaluations of our lives.

I.

It is tempting to suppose that inaction on climate change is the result of ignorance. However, most people are not genuinely ignorant about the threat posed by climate change, nor the link between human activity and greenhouse gas emissions. According to one particularly large US study, a majority of people are now convinced that climate change is already occurring, and that human beings are the cause. Indeed, this study divided people into six groups: the ‘Alarmed’ (18%), who are “fully convinced of the reality and seriousness of climate change and are already taking individual, consumer, and political action to address it”; the ‘Concerned’ (33%), who are “also convinced that global warming is happening and a serious problem, but have not yet engaged the issue personally”; the ‘Cautious’ (19%), the ‘Disengaged’ (12%) and the ‘Doubtful’ (11%), which each “represent different stages of understanding and acceptance of the problem” without being actively involved in responding to it; and the ‘Dismissive’ (7%), who are “very sure it is not happening and are actively involved as opponents of a national effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions”. According to this study, then, only a mere 7% of people seem to overtly reject the reality of climate change. If we also subtract the percentage of people from the first group, we are left with a remarkable claim: that 75% of people are not genuinely ignorant
about the threat posed by climate change, although they are not undertaking any kind of action in response.⁴

Let us presume that most people would seriously object to the consequences of a warmer world for current and future generations, and for nonhuman life. If so, there should be some kind of tension involved in knowing about the threat posed by climate change, but failing to respond to it. Indeed, a large body of psychological research suggests that this tension motivates us to distance ourselves from the ethical significance of what we know. In their review of this literature, Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser identify a variety of ways in which we might distance ourselves from potentially troubling information about large-scale environmental problems.⁵

First, we might distract ourselves by making minor changes, such as recycling or riding a bicycle to work, in order to suppress feelings of helplessness or guilt.⁶ Alternately, we might distract ourselves by focusing on the satisfaction of more immediate pleasures.⁷ Second, we might attempt to distance ourselves from the emotional significance of what we know.⁸ Because the worst effects of climate change won't materialise until some distant point in the future, or because we believe they will likely occur in some far-away place, it is possible to separate our affective response to what we know from our intellectual grasp of it.⁹ Third, we might consciously refuse to engage with how this information makes us feel, repressing our anxiety or distress.¹⁰ Fourth, we might try to shift the blame others who we believe have contributed more, which is usually easy because individuals only contribute inconsequentially to overall emissions.¹¹ And fifth, we might be unrealistically optimistic about what is currently being done about the problem, either by ourselves or by others.¹²

Thus, although most of us understand, to some extent, what the consequences of a warmer world are likely to be, and although we would strongly object to those consequences, we do not feel motivated to act. Initially, this may look like a case of akrasia: most people recognise that they should be doing something about climate change, but fail to act. However, such an analysis does not capture the subtle psychology that is involved in this response. In failing to respond to climate change, we are not just failing to act well; we are also trying to undermine our motivation to act, separating what we intellectually grasp to be true from what we believe we ethically ought to do. The result of this, I will suggest, is a certain kind of self-deception: that is,

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⁴ Of course, what counts here as a response to climate change will be rather vague. In the next chapter, I take this question up directly, asking what we should be doing as individuals, and collectively as societies.


⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kari Marie Norgaard, ""People Want to Protect Themselves a Little Bit": Emotions, Denial, and Social Movement Nonparticipation*," Sociological Inquiry 76, no. 3 (2006).

¹⁰ Although indifference is a form of psychological protection against strong and distressing feelings, it appears to encourage a more passive response to problem. See Homburg, Stolberg, and Wagner, "Coping with Global Environmental Problems: Development and First Validation of Scales."

¹¹ Norgaard 2006 has shown this prominently in her study of Norwegian attitudes. See Norgaard, ""People Want to Protect Themselves a Little Bit": Emotions, Denial, and Social Movement Nonparticipation*.

in failing to respond to a threat as potentially serious as climate change, and in successfully
nullifying our motivation to respond to it, we must deceive ourselves about what we are doing,
and ultimately about who we are.

However, before we can explore these questions, there is a pressing theoretical obstacle to be
overcome. That is, many scholars would not call the phenomenon identified above an instance
of self-deception, because it does not seem to be primarily a matter of coming to believe false
propositions. In the next section, I argue that the most interesting cases of self-deception are not
reducible to being in a state of false belief about some matter of fact. Rather, I will argue that
being self-deceived centrally involves having a false or distorted conception of oneself, which is
often the result of powerful fantasies or illusions about who we are, and who we would like to
be. Moreover, the possibility of being self-deceived in this way raises complex ethical questions
about our agency, and about when it is plausible to hold others ethically to blame for deceiving
themselves. Nonetheless, I will suggest several reasons to think that self-deception about
climate change, and other similar problems, is highly problematic.

II.

There is little agreement among philosophers concerning how to understand the phenomenon
of self-deception. According to one common view, self-deception follows the model of
interpersonal deception, in which I intend to get you to believe a claim \( p \), even though I believe \( p \)
to be false. If we understand self-deception in these terms, then when I deceive myself into
believing \( p \), I intentionally try to get myself to believe \( p \), although I also think that \( p \) is false.
Views of this sort are called ‘intentionalist’ because, analogously with interpersonal deception,
this sort epistemic behaviour is intentional. Donald Davidson gives the classic statement of the
intentionalist view: “\( A \) has evidence on the basis of which he believes that \( p \) is more apt to be
true than its negation; the thought that \( p \), or the thought that he ought rationally to believe
\( p \), motivates \( A \) to act in such a way as to cause himself to believe the negation of \( p \)”.

The benefit of conceiving of self-deception along the lines of interpersonal deception is that an eventual claim
for moral responsibility for holding the false belief becomes fairly straightforward, since our
self-deceptive behaviour is here understood as an *intentional action*. However, there are two
paradoxes that intentionalist views must resolve. First is the ‘static’ paradox, which is that I
apparently need to hold two contradictory beliefs in order to be self-deceived – I need to believe
both \( p \) and \( \sim p \). Second there is the ‘dynamic’ paradox, which focuses on the status of one’s
intention to deceive oneself. In the case of interpersonal deception, I can clearly understand
(although I need not be fully conscious of this at the time) that I intend to deceive you about the
truth of \( p \), but how can I similarly intend to deceive myself without also becoming aware of this
intention? And, if I do so, won't this awareness nullify my intention to deceive myself? In order
to overcome these paradoxes, intentionalists often argue for some form of temporal or
psychological division, so that different subsystems of the brain become responsible for

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13 Donald Davidson, “Deception and Division,” in *Actions and Events*, ed. Ernest LePore, and McLaughlin,
14 Such an approach typically assumes that an intention is a ‘mental event’, and that we can only be
‘morally responsible’ for actions, which are understood to be the products of what we intend. However,
there is much to be said against each of these assumptions, and against the particular conception of
morality that operates by means of them. I discuss some aspects of this general formula of responsibility
in more detail in the following chapter.
different aspects of self-deception, including one's simultaneous grasp of contradictory beliefs, and one's intention to deceive oneself.\(^\text{16}\)

In contrast, non-intentionalists argue that resorting to explanations of temporal and spatial psychological division are not justified by appeal to their explanatory value. Instead, they assert that self-deception is a species of motivated irrational belief. According to Alfred Mele’s influential view, “people enter self-deception in acquiring a belief that \(p\) if and only if \(p\) is false and they acquire the belief in a suitably biased way”.\(^\text{17}\) Mele highlights two kinds of informational bias and two kinds of evidential selectivity to explain when beliefs are formed in suitably biased ways: i) negative misinterpretation, where an agent desires a belief \(p\) to be false, and reads the evidence in a way that supports this desire; ii) positive misinterpretation, where an agent desires \(p\) to be true, and reads the evidence in a way that supports this desire; iii) selective focusing/attending, where an agent desires \(p\) to be true, and focuses only on evidence supporting \(p\) being true; iv) selective evidence gathering, where an agent desires \(p\) to be true, and searches only for evidence supporting the truth of \(p\), potentially ignoring contrary (and stronger) evidence.\(^\text{18}\) In addition, Mele points out that one’s desire that \(p\) be true sustains one’s belief in \(p\)’s truth via a variety of psychological strategies, including a general propensity to attend to vivid information over dull or obscure information, a propensity to focus on information that is easily available to us, as well as a propensity to focus in information that confirms rather than denies one’s hypothesis (the so-called confirmation bias).\(^\text{19}\)

Despite their differences, both intentional and non-intentional views are primarily focused on individual beliefs. However, Ariela Lazar has suggested that self-deceptive beliefs are instead “direct expressions of the subject's wishes, fears and hopes. Qua beliefs which mostly correspond to such factors (rather than to evidence), self-deceptive states may be described as fantasies”.\(^\text{20}\) Lazar defends an alternative view of self-deception as fundamentally an existential category. That is, while both the intentional and the non-intentional views understand self-deception as an action undertaken by the self, or by some part of a divided self, Lazar claims that we are self-deceived as a result of harbouring particular fantasies, hopes, or desires about


\(^{17}\) Alfred R. Mele, *Motivation and Agency* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 163. Intentionalist critics of Mele’s view point out that a motivational bias need not be present. For instance, Anna Nicholson claims that having an intention to believe \(p\) sets up our epistemic practice in such a way that evidence telling in favour or against the truth of \(p\) will count as evidence for \(p\). But after forming this intention and “priming” evidence, it would no longer be necessary for the agent to be aware of this. See Anna Nicholson, "Cognitive Bias, Intentionality and Self-Deception," *Teorema: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 26, no. 3 (2007).


\(^{20}\) Ariela Lazar, "Deceiving Oneself or Self-Deceived? On the Formation of Beliefs under the Influence," *Mind* 108, no. 430 (1999): 266. While Lazar concedes that on rare occasions self-deception does involve an intention to form a belief (for instance, a person who is convinced by Pascal’s wager, but who still does not believe in god), standard cases cannot be made sense of along intentionalist lines. See esp. Pp. 271-77.
ourselves and others. That is, it is these cognitive and affective constructions which shape self-deception, rather than more specific goals or irrational desires. Thus, commenting on the example of the self-deceived cuckold, Lazar suggests that such a person would often experience "periods in which he is convinced or even sure that the evidence of betrayal is overwhelming, as well as periods when he realizes that he does not possess such evidence. These cognitive shifts need not be accompanied by changes in relevant information".21 Rather, we can understand them as shaped by the complex self-conceptions of such a person, which make him both prone to ignoring evidence and being overly sensitive to it, depending upon his mood, his self-esteem, and other factors shaping his sense of self.

On this view, we form irrational beliefs primarily because we interpret information ‘under the influence’ of emotions. That is, much of the evidence available to us can be interpreted differently without any corresponding change in the evidence itself, but merely a change in the affective state or mood of the person interpreting it. As Lazar notes, there is already substantial research into the ways in which emotions bias our interpretation of information, which suggests that emotions are generally correlated with "less systematic thinking, less efficient processing skills, reliance on simplistic response strategies, decreased reliance on direct evidence, and increased reliance on superficial cues".22

However, what Lazar classifies as self-deception is surely too broad to capture only this phenomenon. For if all that self-deception requires is that we form beliefs under the influence of emotions, then a great many of our beliefs would appear to be self-deceptive although they were true. Simply forming beliefs under the influence of emotions does not mean that our beliefs will be either false or deceptive.23 Moreover, it is not the case that emotions should be thought of generally as disturbing our thinking and our detection of salience patterns. For instance, in the area of moral cognition there is substantial research into the vital role that emotions play in our ability to make moral judgements.24 It would be a mistake therefore to think that emotions are obstacles to clear thought and reasoning across the board.

Nonetheless, Lazar’s key complaint is that most philosophical discussions of self-deception overlook the role of emotions entirely. According to Lazar, "[o]verwhelmingly, the formulation of the problem of self-deception does not appeal to emotions at all, and most often, neither does the solution. Yet... I cannot think of one clear example of self-deception where the irrational belief (as well as its rational counterpart) is not associated with a strong emotional response. Indeed, the intensity of an emotion may be such that, in an extreme case, a person may hold a view while admitting that it is undermined by the weight of evidence".25 Moreover, Lazar points

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21 Ibid., 281.
23 Another way of putting this would be to say that there is no logical connection between the truth of a belief and our deceptively acquiring it.
24 Antonio Damasio explores cases of people who have suffered a brain injury that damaged the emotional centre of their brains, such that they could understand moral reasoning without being able to form judgements and decide between courses of action. See Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994).
out that our emotions affect us “immediately and in a way which, to a high degree, is not subject
to our control. Fear, hope, and their kin... affect cognition without the existence of a plan that is
designed for this purpose”.26 On this view, then, it is crucial that we understand self-deception
via the fantasies and illusions we entertain, and the emotions that these elicit from us. Indeed,
these constructions seem to be what give a determinate shape to our epistemic responses, and
thus to our deceptions. For self-deceivers do not deceive themselves about the truth of random
or unrelated propositions. Instead, they are motivated to believe certain things to be true, rather
than others, because such beliefs fit a particular self-conception. But this makes self-deception
into primarily a kind of ignorance or delusion about the self.

Some might worry that the very idea that we deceive ourselves seems to re-introduce some of
the paradoxes associated with intentionalist views.27 However, Robert Solomon has suggested
that we can avoid these issues by moving away from a ‘lexical’ understanding of self-deception
as deception by the self to deception about the self.28 Solomon is highly critical of treatments of
self-deception which assume at the outset that “one is clear about the truth oneself and then
purposefully and directly misleads the other about its nature”, because this assumes a “degree
of autonomy, rationality and transparency that just doesn’t hold up to scrutiny”.29 Instead,
Solomon argues that self-deception is ultimately a “dynamic social phenomenon, not just an
internal drama or a pathological condition”.30

What is central to the view of self-deception we have been considering is that our motivation to
become self-deceived stems from an attachment to certain fantasies or illusions about
ourselves. It is in the service of these fantasies that our epistemic behaviour can be prone to
distortion, because this aims at sustaining a particular view of ourselves, even against contrary
evidence. But this is not primarily a matter of having false beliefs, or even being motivated to
have false beliefs. Instead, self-deception looks more like an existential condition. Fundamental
to being self-deceived are the ways in which I conceive of myself as a certain kind of person, and
the powerful affective states that are attached to such self-conceptions. Indeed, this approach
has the advantage of recognising what is illuminating about both intentionalist and
nonintentionalist views of self-deception. For, intentionalists may indeed be correct in claiming
that some part of us attempts to deceive another part of us about the truth of some matter of
fact, because this belief serves the maintenance of an illusion about ourselves. And
nonintentionalists may also be correct to emphasise the strength of irrational motivations in
deceptively formed beliefs, because these irrational motivations are attached to particular
illusions that we hold about ourselves. The strength of a desire to maintain a particular view of
ourselves against contrary evidence also explains why we would actually be motivated to
deceive ourselves. It is not merely that we wish to believe something, whatever the evidence
suggests. Rather, this wish is centrally integrated into our sense of who we are.

26 Ibid., 282.
27 Richard Holton makes this point in his "What Is the Role of the Self in Self-Deception?," Proceedings of
Clancy Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Holton argues for this conclusion, although with a
different conception of the self in play. See Holton, "What Is the Role of the Self in Self-Deception?"
30 Ibid.
If illusions about the self are central to understanding self-deception, what might these illusions involve? According to Solomon, many of the illusions we have about ourselves spring from the natural impulse to be “thought of and treated in certain ways and not others by other people”. Indeed, this general claim is borne out by substantial psychological research into the strength and prevalence of biased self-conceptions. In their overview of this research, Taylor and Brown find that “rather than maintaining accurate views of themselves, the world, and the future, most people hold unrealistically positive views of the self, an exaggerated sense of personal control over the environment, and unrealistic optimism about the future”. One common illusion is the over-estimation of one’s social competence. Taylor et al. claim that “[m]ost people believe that they are more socially competent than others think they are, and in general self-conceptions appear to be more favourable than how the self is perceived by others”. Moreover, we seem to be implicitly aware of the susceptibility of our illusions to correction, for we favour “grandiose self-conceptions” about “attributes that cannot be directly tested than about attributes that can be readily held to a standard”. Thus, most people recognise that it would be more difficult to sustain an illusion about oneself as a professional golfer than an illusion about oneself as a profound thinker. Indeed, some of the attributes that we would be most likely to exaggerate about ourselves are our ethical characteristics, since the benefits of seeming to be ethically upright are clear, and since it is difficult to imagine a test which could determine whether someone was really as generous, or kind, as she believed herself to be. As Daniel Goleman pointed out, in general we seem to believe that we are “a little kinder, smarter, more skilled than we really are”. And we maintain these illusions by “focusing on instances that confirm that belief and disattending to or discounting those that do not”.

This raises the prospect that most people would be quite prone to being self-deceived about their ethical characters. If most people believe that they are better people than they actually seem to be, it is natural to suppose that they would have to downplay or ignore evidence to the contrary. Over time, however, this kind of response would ramify the extent to which we are self-deceived, as we become more skilled at either avoiding what we do not want to see, or rationalising away the significance of what we cannot avoid seeing.

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31 Ibid., 33.
33 Ibid.
34 As Jonathon Brown noted, "it may be the case that individuals are relatively free to assume, for instance, that they are more interesting, friendly, and humorous than the average other person, and precisely because social attributes lack objective referents, such beliefs may be harbored with psychological impunity". Cited in ibid., p. 125.
37 Ibid.
III.

On the view of self-deception I have advanced here, it is implausible to think that all cases of self-deception ought to attract blame. As Solomon points out, "what it means to be false to oneself is a rather complex ethical problem; our knowledge of ourselves is not only incomplete but undergoing constant revision, often along the lines of ideals and ambitions that are themselves ill-conceived, inappropriate or merely borrowed".38 In the first place, it cannot be that any false self-conception or self-presentation ought to be considered ethically problematic merely because it is false. And this is just as well, for there are clear examples in which self-deception looks not only benign, but even beneficial.39 Consider, for instance, the terminally ill cancer patient who understands that she has a very low chance of recovering, but who also knows that this possibility will increase if she manages to believe that she will recover. Moreover, since change is a necessary feature of an evolving self, what constitutes a delusion about myself at one point in time may become, at some later stage, an accurate or genuine self-image.40

Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to think that being self-deceived about our ethical characters can be seriously problematic. For instance, consider an example that is analogous to climate change: the response of many people to information about factory farming. There is now considerable information available to the public about the cruelty involved in modern factory farming. 'Factory farming' is a description for the industrial production of meat products, which aims at maximising production, but often at the expense of animal welfare. Individual animals are crammed into extremely overcrowded holding pens (which are rarely cleaned), and are force-fed an extremely high-nutrient diet in order to mature unnaturally early.41 Indeed, chickens are typically genetically modified to grow so large, so early, that their bones break under their own body weight. Animal welfare groups and others have long tried to point out the excessive cruelty involved in factory farming. Consequently, there is now a great deal of information about these practices available to the public, in the form of documentaries, studies, and interviews with industry and animal welfare experts. Despite this, most people continue to consume the products of factory farming. Indeed, it is estimated that 99% of animals reared and killed in the US are from factory farms.42 Globally, the reach of factory farms has increased substantially in recent years, and meat consumption has continued to rise.43

What do we make of someone who knows about what is involved in factory farming, but who does not respond to what she knows? Nancy Williams has suggested that many people deliberately avoid investigating factory farming practices in order to "render themselves ignorant about the moral issues associated".44 But, despite such attempts, Williams argues that

40 Another way to say this is that such a proposition would lack a truth value until some later time.
41 The classic philosophical discussion of factory farming is still Peter Singer's Animal Liberation, 2nd ed. (London: Cape, 1990).
42 This estimate is from activist group 'Farm Forward', based on U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2002 Census of Agriculture, June 2004. Available at: https://farmforward.com/ending-factory-farming/
43 UN Food and Agriculture Organization statistics available at: http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4252e/y4252e05b.htm
this does not make us genuinely ignorant about what is involved in factory farming, because there are adequate opportunities to become informed, such as documentaries, news stories, animal welfare groups, or even the presence of vegetarians in one's society. These sources of information should at the very least signal potential concerns with modern food production. Thus, Williams suggests that when people profess not to know how their food is produced, they are actually registering their wish not to investigate what they have already heard for fear that these issues will turn out to be morally troubling. Thus, “in one sense people know but in another they do not know, could not afford to know, for their own moral sake”. 45

The conclusion that finding out more about factory farming would not only spoil one's appetite, but would be very troubling, follows from a common ethical belief: that cruelty is wrong. Thus, for the same reason, the unnecessarily cruel treatment of animals is also wrong. But in trying to distance oneself from information about factory farming, we are obviously failing to live up to this ethical commitment. As consumers of the products of factory farms, we are partly involved in practices that we would have to condemn because of their cruelty. Moreover, given the significant contribution which factory farming makes to greenhouse gas emissions, avoiding cruelty is not the only compelling reason we might have to find out more about where our food comes from.

Williams is surely correct say that people who try to render themselves ignorant about factory farming are not genuinely ignorant, for one must be able to recognise potentially troubling information in order to avoid it. But, as I have suggested, this behaviour also fits a larger pattern of selectively re-interpreting evidence in the service of a particular image we have of ourselves. That is, in order to preserve the view that we are reasonably kind people, or at least, that we abhor unnecessary cruelty, we will have to re-interpret evidence of our complicity in a very cruel practice. As we have seen in the case of information about climate change, there is a variety of means available to achieve this, including distraction, emotional distancing, repression, blame-shifting, or even unrealistic optimism. But the result is a deception: if we manage to convince ourselves that there is nothing amiss, and that we are not involved in an ethically dubious practice, then we will be able to maintain overly positive estimations of ourselves against contrary evidence. However, we also become more ignorant about what our behaviour actually reveals about us as people.

There is good reason to suppose that something similar has occurred in response to climate change. As Stephen Gardiner has argued, our collective failure to call for meaningful climate policy solutions seems to reveal many of us to be reckless, callous, and shallow. 46 However, it is likely that most people would be surprised to be labelled as such. Nonetheless, according to Gardiner we are behaving recklessly in response to climate change because we are prepared to impose “risks on the vulnerable that are not just severe… but also seriously unjustified, and perhaps deeply thoughtless and wanton”. 47 As Gardiner says, “[i]f we ask what kind of person (or community, nation, or generation) would impose risks of severe climate harms on others

under our current epistemic circumstances, we cast the issue in a new, and starkly unflattering, light. Moreover, we are behaving callously because this response displays a "profound indifference to the concerns of those who must reap the consequences of our behaviour". As Gardiner notes, "[i]f we are unwilling even to consider our potential victims in our deliberations (or at least to take their concerns seriously), then a core feature of the problem is that for us the question of justice is not even really on the table". And our response to climate change also reveals us to be shallow, because our lifestyles are one of the chief drivers of increasing emissions. But, as Gardiner says, the benefits we gain from a great deal of consumer behaviour are "at best relatively unimportant... and at worst close to trivial, even to us, and especially in comparison to the damage done". If Gardiner is right about what our response to climate change reveals about us, it is also clear that we mostly are unaware of these aspects of ourselves. This is analogous to what our response to factory farming shows: although we mostly abhor unnecessary cruelty, by looking away from the true significance of what we learn about factory farming, we show ourselves to be less concerned with avoiding cruelty than with satisfying a desire for inexpensive food. Similarly, although most people would want to avoid the potentially devastating consequences of a warmer world, most people appear unprepared to do anything about this if it requires foregoing their usual activities. But if so, we reveal ourselves to be people like this; that is, people who are more attached to our lifestyles than to our professed concern for others.

However, there are also important disanalogies between these two cases. One could object that self-deception about climate change might be a reasonable response, since the contribution of each person taken alone is inconsequential. Unlike factory farming, where each person can at least choose not to consume their products, there is no way to completely avoid contributing to climate change. Indeed, climate change is a particularly difficult collective action problem: it is both global and intergenerational in scope, and these features make it seem rational for each generation, like each individual, to pass the buck onto future generations. It is thus likely that an understandable sense of individual futility and helplessness motivates many to distance themselves from information about climate change. Crompton & Kasser comment that there can be "little doubt that awareness of the scale of environmental problems... can lead people to experience a sense of threat".

48 Gardiner, "Are We the Scum of the Earth? Climate Change, Geoengineering, and Humanity's Challenge," 245.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 245-46.
53 As Steven Gardiner argues, because harms will be mostly felt by future generations, and because these are expected to most severely affect people in poorer nations, a situation results in which "[e]ach new generation will face the same incentive structure as soon as it gains the power to decide whether or not to act". From his A Perfect Moral Storm [Electronic Resource]: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 353.
54 Crompton, "Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity," 15. They add: "Threats to existing identity probably also arise when people realise that they will have to fundamentally change
confronted with scientists’ projections about natural disaster, disease, war and food shortage. Anxiety, guilt and threats to self-esteem can also result when people recognise their own complicity in exacerbating these environmental problems”.55 At the base of this objection is the familiar ethical assumption that if I should do something, it must also be within my power to do it. And this seems to indicate a significant difference between these two cases. For an individual can certainly decide to stop consuming the products of factory farming. But it is not clear what an individual can decide to do in response to climate change.56 Moreover, given that the worst effects of climate change will not be felt for some time, it would be comparatively easy to distract one’s attention from a distant problem about which one can do nothing.

While there is less I can do about climate change than about factory farming as an individual, it does not follow that I can do nothing. Nor does it follow that I am not blameworthy in the same way for distancing myself from ethically troubling information and consequently for deceiving myself about what I am really doing. In order to see this, we need to get a better view of ourselves. As I said, it is likely that most people would be ignorant about what their response to climate change reveals about them as people. We deceive both ourselves and other people for a variety of reasons that cannot be understood without considering the complex functions that our projected self-images play in our lives. But while many of these delusions do not seem particularly blameworthy, occasionally they can be very seriously wrong. When we judge it too onerous to act on our ethical beliefs, and consequently find ways of hiding, downplaying or re-interpreting the significance of information about the problem we should be responding to, we risk becoming the sorts of people that characteristically do this. But even so, failure will not always mean the same thing. Sometimes, a failure to do what we judge to be right will be something we regret, but something which we learn from and hope not to repeat. But on other occasions a failure can mar an entire life, making it forever tarnished both in the eyes of the person whose life it is, and in the eyes of those who would know its details. Moreover, failure here does not need to be confined to individual actions, for we can speak in exactly the same way about our regret for the way in which we live, if it is clear that we should have tried to live differently.

An extreme example of this sort of tarnishing is evident in Hannah Arendt’s description of the ‘family man’ in her essay, “Organized Guilt”.57 Arendt describes the respectable ‘bourgeois’ gentleman as the essential ‘cog’ in Heinrich Himmler’s bureaucratic machine, who was complicit in Nazi atrocities, but who considered himself to be ethically upright, and was generally regarded as such by those who knew him. Arendt writes:

“It was Pégyu, I believe, who called the family man the ‘grand aventurier du 20e siècle.’ He died too soon to learn that he was also the great criminal of the century. We had been so accustomed to admire or gently ridicule the family man’s kind concern and earnest concentration on the welfare of his family, his solemn determination to make life easy for his wife and children, that we hardly noticed how the devoted paterfamilias, worried about nothing so much as his security, was transformed under the pressure of the chaotic economic conditions of our time into an involuntary

many aspects of their lives either in order to avert ecological catastrophe, or to cope with catastrophes once these occur”.55 Ibid.

56 I take up this question again in the next chapter.

The tragic consequence of the family man’s devotion to the private sphere of family, career and personal security was that this devotion could be easily exploited by a totalitarian regime. Arendt notes that under the Nazis, “[i]t became clear that for the sake of his pension, his life insurance, the security of his wife and children, such a man was ready to sacrifice his beliefs, his honour, and his human dignity”. What was required, Arendt claimed, in order for the family man’s devotion to the private sphere to be perverted, was “the Satanic genius of Himmler”, who discovered that this person “was entirely prepared to do literally anything when the ante was raised and the bare existence of his family was threatened. The only condition he put was that he should be fully exempted from responsibility for his acts”.60

In such a circumstance, it is little wonder that otherwise respectable and well-regarded people could be perverted into complicity with the crimes of the Nazi state. But Arendt cautions against thinking that this problem can corrupt people merely in tragic circumstances. As Arendt says: 

“What we have called the ‘bourgeois’ is the modern man of the masses, not in his exalted moments of collective excitement, but in the security (today one should say insecurity) of his own private domain. He has driven the dichotomy of private and public functions, of family and occupation, so far that he can no longer find in his own person any connection between the two”.61

The ‘family man’ identified here is of course the modern human being, who turns away from engagement in the public sphere in favour of his or her private concerns. Indeed, Arendt claims that this kind of modern private citizen is a general, international feature of industrialised society as such.62 Moreover, as Arendt says, although we typically admire such a person’s devotion to the welfare of his family, there is something profoundly wrong with his turning away from public concerns. This is most evident in such a person’s mistaken belief that, so long as he fulfilled his function well, he was exempt from any responsibility for what the Nazi regime he worked for had done. Arendt cites the shocked and pained response of a bureaucrat who had been paymaster at the Maidanek concentration camp, when an accusation of guilt is levelled at him by the first allied reporter to witness the devastation:

Q. Do you know the Russians will hang you?
A. (Bursting into tears) Why should they? What have I done?63

58 Ibid., 128.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 130.
62 Ibid.
63 The full transcript:

Q. Did you kill people in the camp? A. Yes.
Q. Did you poison them with gas? A. Yes.
Q. Did you bury them alive? A. It sometimes happened.
Q. Were the victims picked from all over Europe? A. I suppose so.
Q. Did you personally help kill people? A. Absolutely not. I was only the paymaster in the camp.
Q. What did you think of what was going on? A. It was bad at first but we got used to it.
Q. Do you know the Russians will hang you? A. (Bursting into tears) Why should they? What have I done?
This person disclaimed any responsibility for what occurred at Maidanek, and even strongly denied any personal involvement in the killing, which he seemed to consider wrong. The paymaster thus apparently believed that he could retreat into the duties of his official role, and could limit himself to responsibility for what occurred in his private sphere. Given this disavowal of responsibility, and apparent conviction that killing the innocent is wrong, the paymaster did not consider himself to be complicit in the atrocities that occurred at the camp. But this brings a similar kind of self-deception into view: the paymaster, we might suppose, continued to think of himself as an ordinarily good person, a person devoted to his private concerns, and who did his duty admirably. Knowledge of what occurred at the camp was insufficient for him to recognise it as evil, or to recognise himself as complicit in evil. Thus, the paymaster’s self-deception obscured from view the true status of his actions.64

Of course, we are unable to judge the life of the paymaster without seeing it as marred by complicity in genocide. By working for the Nazis in this capacity, we cannot just consider the paymaster’s actions as being appropriate for someone with certain bureaucratic responsibilities who was also trying to do the best for his family. Even if the paymaster had escaped punishment for his role, and had gone on to live a long life that appeared to be unaffected by guilt or remorse, we would still be unable to see this person’s life in an ethically positive (or at least neutral) light because of what he had been complicit in. This raises the further point that even successful cases of self-deception can be illuminated by considering the wider, social context in which evaluations of a person’s life are made.

What does this example have to tell us about our responses to climate change? One thing to recognise here is that the evaluation of a life is not something that is up to us as individuals. We might deceive ourselves, but this example shows that what we believe, and what we want others to believe, does not determine how others will actually see us. This point is particularly powerful retrospectively. Consider, for instance, how we do not look back at the behaviour of slave owners during the period of slavery in the US with forgiving eyes, despite the fact that these were common attitudes and behaviours for someone in this historical context. While there is great obscurity in thinking about how future generations will judge us, thinking about the judgement of future generations can shed further light on the goodness of our own lives. Moreover, if we consider how future generations have come to judge their forebears in certain cases, such as the retrospective condemnation of slave owners after the racial dynamics and perspectives which supported the institution of slavery had changed, then a plausible case can be made that the evaluation of a life can even change after one has died.65

Our self-deception about climate change also appears hard to justify to future generations because, like the paymaster, it is based on a retreat from the public to the private sphere despite clear evidence of a serious collective problem. Albert Bandura has written that “[p]eople often find themselves in moral predicaments when they pursue activities that serve their self-

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Quoted by Arendt from Raymond A. Davies, a correspondent for the Jewish Telegraph Agency.

64 Arendt, “Organized Guilt”, 128-9. Indeed, Arendt similarly describes Himmler as a person with “all the outer aspect of respectability, all the habits of a good paterfamilias who does not betray his wife and anxiously seeks to secure a decent future for his children”.

interests but violate their moral standards by inflicting human and environmental harm”. 66 When a conflict like this arises, however, we can ”rid ourselves of the moral problem... by selectively disengaging [our] moral self-sanctions from detrimental social policies and practices”. The result of this selective and deliberate distancing allows us to continue acting in the way we desire without ”the restraint of self-censure”. 67 And it is not only self-censure which we can avoid by acting in this way. Our willingness to shirk the obligations we would normally associate with, for instance, a commitment to avoid harming others, is also motivated by our recognition that there is little prospect of our being held accountable by others. In the first place, this is due to the spatially and temporally remote nature of climate change. But it is also a consequence of the point that, if most people are engaged in some kind of self-deception, they would be unlikely to criticise others for the same behaviour.

Indeed, this kind of collective disengagement is not new. Writing at the end of the Cold War, Goleman claimed that ”given the dangers from the nuclear threat or other catastrophic weapons on the one hand, or those from the ecological crisis on the other, our positive illusions can become a pathological response. The illusion of unfounded optimism can lead to the conviction that everything will turn out all right for the planet, or that nothing much is really wrong, and so there is nothing one need do to try to change things”. 68 But, as Goleman notes, ”[o]ne sad consequence of these illusions can be tuning out the suffering that is now being felt by those most impoverished on the planet”. 69 Commenting specifically on the growing sense of ecological crisis evident even at the time he was writing, Goleman claimed that ”because our positive illusions tend to cushion us from feeling discomfort about ourselves or about future turns of events, we can easily disattend to the links between how we live our lives and the ecological consequences. Most specifically, we can ignore the ways in which our habits of consumption and waste are the engine driving the ecological devastation of the planet”. 70

David Coady and Richard Corry believe that our disengagement from climate change will actually look shameful both in our own eyes and in the eyes of future generations. 71 They claim that many of us ”would readily recognize [our behaviour] as shameful” if it were directed at other ”morally similar collective action problems”. 72 Indeed, Coady and Corry liken climate change to the struggle against fascism during the Second World War, which they claim is ”a problem of comparable scale and significance”. While there are clear differences between these cases, it does seem appropriate to point to shame as befitting successive generations of people who have known about this threat, who have known that collective action was needed to address it, but who have turned away from doing so while excusing themselves of guilt or responsibility in the process. 73 Again, this is a point about retrospective judgement, namely that

67 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 101.
73 In the first place, climate change is the unintended result of the uncoordinated actions of many individuals, while the policies of fascist states are clearly aimed at certain ends that are themselves abhorrent. Second, climate change is a process of changing the background conditions of life for all
future generations will not be able to look at our lives without also making these sorts of judgements about us, given the dangers that we will be inflicting on them, and given the light-minded justifications we could offer in defence of ourselves.

Those who knowingly contribute to climate change but are unwilling to press for the sorts of changes required to address it risk incurring a sort of ethical stain on evaluations of their lives. This is most obvious concerning the failure of our political leaders, who seem to have an extra kind of role-specific responsibility to respond to serious collective threats. As Gardiner says, “those who fail as political leaders risk tarnishing, and indeed blighting, their own careers and lives”, because few will remember that, say, they managed to maintain steady employment and economic growth over their time in office, when they also deliberately failed “to take serious steps to prevent a highly predictable catastrophe for their own countries and for humanity as such”. But it will not only be political elites who run this sort of risk. Our turning from the public sphere, where these issues can be discussed and addressed, to the private sphere of our immediate concerns will also be very hard to justify to future generations, who will have every reason to think poorly of us as a result.

Thinking about the judgement of future generations, I believe, is similarly helpful if we want to know whether our responses to climate change really are blameworthy. My suspicion is that the excuse of individual inconsequentialism would not get us very far with them. The reason for this is that it is being used to excuse us from trying to do something about the problem in whatever way we are able. For the more pertinent question to ask here is not ‘What can I do as an individual?’, but simply ‘What can I do?’ And the answer to this question does not need to be restricted by the designation of the personal pronoun ‘I’ to individual action, undertaken alone. It may be that there is nothing I can do as an individual; but that does not mean that there is nothing I can do at all. And it is here that the fundamental cause of negative evaluation seems to lie. From individual inconsequentialism, all that follows is that I can do nothing as an individual. But individuals can certainly coordinate their responses to achieve things that none of them can accomplish alone. Future generations might well say that we should already have done more to mitigate climate change. But they would almost certainly insist that we should now be doing more.

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species, including our own, as they have been for millennia. Third, there is potentially no upper limit to the changes that this process will cause, and hence no limit to the hardships and harms that might be inflicted on future generations. Coady and Corry point to the further dissimilarity that fascism was "organized by a handful of governments", to which individuals could not contribute independently. 74 Gardiner, "Are We the Scum of the Earth? Climate Change, Geoengineering, and Humanity’s Challenge," 251.

75 One interesting consequence of this is that we can become ethically blameworthy for failing to properly discharge our political responsibilities. I discuss this further in the next chapter.


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Responsibility for Climate Change: collectively responsible but not to blame?

Introduction

Philosophers have struggled to show who is most responsible for climate change. Whether we think in terms of individuals or collectives, it seems that there are no actions which could be attributed to individuals, nor any collective agents that could be responsible for them. As the unintentional consequence of entire ways of living, climate change seems to be a problem that no-one is responsible for. Indeed, a recent discussion effectively concedes that climate change is a collective problem involving no wrong actions, no moral agents, and hence no sense of moral responsibility. However, I argue here that these difficulties arise because we are looking at climate change through the wrong theoretical lens: the lens of Kantian moral agency. In this chapter, I explore a novel approach grounded in Iris Young’s theory of responsibility for structural injustice. This approach provides a far better account of why we share a collective responsibility for climate change, and does not rely upon the usual, but problematic assumptions about moral agency. I suggest that thinking about responsibility for climate change in this way culminates in a renewed focus on nation-states, and on the responsibility that individuals bear as members of political communities.

I.

Although we all contribute to climate change, it is unclear whether any individuals or groups are morally responsible for it. While billions of individuals have contributed to the causal chain of events that has produced climate change, philosophers have tried to identify a subset of agents who are not only causally but also morally responsible for climate change. However this is achieved, a further account of liability to pay for climate change adaptation and mitigation is then supposed to follow. Thus, the much-discussed ‘Polluter Pays Principle’ (PPP) tries to isolate the main culprits (i.e. polluters) who are most responsible for causing climate change, and to make them pay to address it now.¹ We can see that such an account will end up being quite complex, because it will need to differentiate the morally responsible agents out of a total set comprising nearly everyone now living, as well as many who have lived since the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, it will have to include some collective entities, such as corporations and governments, which have causally contributed to climate change by enacting policies which produced large quantities of greenhouse gases.

In these discussions, it is also often assumed that whoever is found to be most responsible for climate change should be the appropriate object of censure.² This tracks an intuition taken from judgements of individual responsibility, where an individual is blamed for bringing about harm which she could reasonably have foreseen. But this assumption is disastrous if it is made a requirement for applying the PPP. For, at least until the publication of the first United Nations

¹ Variations of the PPP are usually discussed alongside variations of a ‘Beneficiary Pays Principle’ (BPP). For a recent discussion of the PPP, see Jeremy Moss’ “Exporting Harm,” in *Climate Change and Justice*, ed. Jeremy Moss (Cambridge University Press, (Forthcoming)).

² See, for instance, Janna Thompson’s “Who’s the Culprit? Assigning Responsibility for Climate Change,” ibid.
report in 1990, the main emitters could reasonably claim not to have foreseen the harmful effects of their actions. But since the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions occurred before then, this would make it hard to blame anyone prior to this point. Others have adopted a rival principle, the ‘Beneficiary Pays Principle’ (BPP), which isolates the beneficiaries of greenhouse gas emissions and requires them to pay for their higher living standards by investing in adaptation and mitigation. Unlike the PPP, arguments making use of the BPP can include pre-1990 emissions whose harm could not have been reasonably foreseen. Although a similar causal account must be told in either case, discussions making use of the BPP do not require that the most significant contributors to climate change be blamed for what could not have been reasonably foreseen.

Now, on any view, those most responsible for climate change will constitute a group that is collectively most responsible. This is because, as many have noted, climate change is a collective action problem that results from many individual actors each pursuing their own ends. Like other collective action problems of this sort, it is a sort of ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ where the ‘tragedy’ is an unintended outcome of other actions. But there is a serious question concerning whether the responsibility in question applies primarily to the individuals who comprise this group, or to the group itself as a collective agent. Philosophers who favour an individualist answer have difficulty making use of the BPP, because the counterfactual claim that current individuals be better off than they would have been seems to fall foul of Derek Parfit’s ‘non-identity problem’. That is, if emissions had not increased in the past, these same individuals would not currently exist. And if so, it makes no sense to suggest that they are presently better off. One might instead argue that some collectives, such as industrialised nation-states, are most responsible for climate change. This allows a plausible response in terms of either a contribution to harm approach, as is encapsulated in the PPP, or an unjust benefit approach, as is encapsulated in the BPP, while avoiding problems with finding extant individuals to hold responsible, and avoiding worries about non-identity. However, serious methodological objections have been raised against collectivist approaches. Moreover, a collectivist focus

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4 It is unclear whether BPP-style arguments conceptually require responsible agents to have both contributed to the problem and to have benefitted from it. For agents benefitting from an injustice which they did not cause could still plausibly be required to make amends. However, in the case of climate change this question is not relevant, for everyone that presently benefits from past emissions has also contributed to the problem in the present.
5 Of course, they might be blamed for other reasons, such as failing to compensate others despite benefitting from the emission of greenhouse gases.
8 For an example of the former, see Neumayer, "In Defence of Historical Accountability for Greenhouse Gas Emissions." For the latter, see Shue, "Global Environment and International Inequality."
9 Caney has argued that a collectivist methodology lacks philosophical justification, because it is not obviously explanatorily superior (and may even be inferior) to individualist accounts of causally contributing to a harm.
might be seriously unfair to those individuals who either did not contribute to the problem, or who actively opposed its creation.¹⁰

But, whatever unit of analysis is preferred, convincing accounts of responsibility for climate change remain elusive.¹¹ To see why, it is worth noting that discussions of responsibility for climate change are a subset of broader philosophical discussions about collective responsibility. Despite their differences, many of these discussions begin by identifying the agents who contribute to a problem, and then explore the conditions of voluntariness under which those contributions occur.¹² Applied to responsibility for climate change, this strategy should work by identifying the agents who intentionally, negligently, or recklessly bring about this harm. But this approach is fraught with difficulties, because the collectives that bring about climate change do not seem to be collective agents in the relevant sense.¹³ If we are primarily interested in causal contributions made to a problem, then there is no particular reason to identify nation-states as the relevant collectives, rather than, say, an ersatz-collective made up of the set of high-emitting actors. But, of course, this would be no more a collective agent than the set of actors who all happen to buy lunch on Fridays. The collectives that bring about climate change do not really appear to be collective agents, since the individuals constituting these collectives are not unified by anything like a common interest or intention.

These problems arise because of the essentially Kantian assumptions that inform them. This picture requires, roughly, the identification of a set of intentional actions, and the identification of a set of moral agents who, collectively, are responsible for them. However, these requirements make it very difficult to talk about responsibility for climate change, because we must isolate a set of agents who act to cause the problem, then establish that these agents either freely willed or intended the harm, and finally show that they knew (or should have known) that such harm was a likely consequence of their action. But no-one burns fossil fuels without a further end in mind, and the problem is not even the intended aim of many unconnected individuals each going about their lives; it is rather a side-effect of many unconnected behaviours, a result which none of these individuals would choose for its own sake. If

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¹⁰This is one of Caney’s main arguments against taking a collectivist approach. I will address this in the final section of this chapter.


¹³Following the terminology common in the literature, I use the term ‘collective’ here to speak about collections of individuals, even though in common usage a collective is typically unified by a common interest or objective. However, the collectives relevant in discussion of climate change are more like what Virginia Held calls a ‘random collection of individuals’. See her "Can a Random Collection of Individuals Be Morally Responsible?", The Journal of Philosophy 67, no. 14 (1970).
responsibility for climate change must be understood in these terms, it is unsurprising that convincing accounts have been hard to come by. Indeed, this picture of agency, action and responsibility seems to rule out a fully-fledged account of responsibility for climate change. Individualists are eventually forced to concede that there are no actions of the relevant sort which can be attributed to individuals, while collectivists are unable to identify any collective actions because the collectives that produce them do not resemble moral agents. Of course, this is not to say that there can be no account of responsibility for climate change. For instance, it might be possible to construct some account of negligence for unintended, but harmful consequences. Nonetheless, I think we can do better than this. For, although climate change is an unintended result of many people living their lives, it is intuitive to think that a more robust sort of responsibility is involved when ordinary ways of living generate a catastrophe.

II.

In a recent discussion, Garrett Cullity has attempted this by targeting a class of actions which can be wrong, and for which we can be held responsible, even when there is neither a causal contribution to a harmful outcome, nor even an expectation of such a contribution. Instead, the wrongness of such actions is derived from their relationship to group action and group endeavour. Cullity calls this a “participatory derivation” of wrong action, where the derivation is from “facts about what we ought to do and your actual or potential participation in our doing it, independently of the effects of your individual action or inaction”. The central thought here is that “the relations in which we stand to others provide us with reasons... [and] that our treatment of others should be justifiable in the light of those reasons”. Thus, when action is not justifiable according to these reasons, it is wrong, whether or not it actually or potentially contributes to harm.

As Cullity says, participatory derivations can be either positive or negative. Positive participatory derivations are those in which I can be required to join in with group actions, because failing to join in would be somehow unfair to those who are already acting. But, as Cullity immediately notes, there does not seem to be a positive derivation available here, since there is no effective group action which is currently aimed at stopping climate change. Perhaps, though, individuals ought to join in with those aiming to live carbon-neutral lives. Cullity identifies four plausible arguments in support of this suggestion. First, we might say that those living carbon-neutral lives produce a public good (i.e., maintaining a stable climate system), and that they ought to do this because it is collectively prudent. Since this action also benefits me, inaction would amount to free-riding on the efforts of others. But why would it be unfair to free ride here? We must apparently assume that the maintenance of a stable climate is both a public good, and a compulsory good; that is, individuals could not choose whether or not to consume

15 Ibid.
16 Cullity also discusses an expected benefit optimisation view, which is broadly consequentialist, but he rejects this for the same reason that the third ‘positive’ argument is rejected, namely that calculating all of the variables is too difficult, and perhaps impossible.
17 I have changed the order in which these arguments occur in Cullity’s discussion, because the second argument is the most serious, and as such will be discussed last. So, the ‘fourth’ argument here corresponds to Cullity’s second argument.
this good. With compulsory goods, there is at least a *prima facie* case for thinking that those who benefit from them ought to contribute their fair share of the cost.\(^\text{18}\)

But Cullity claims that a “scheme of collective prudence from which no contributor gains a net benefit ought not to be supported at all; if some do while others do not, the contributory demand on the latter is unfair”.\(^\text{19}\) Free-riding on others’ maintenance of a stable climate system would only be unfair if the benefits enjoyed by the individual free-rider outweigh the costs of joining in. However, as Cullity says, it is very hard to believe that the class of wealthy, high-emitting individuals are actually receiving a greater benefit from the efforts of those living carbon-neutral lives than the costs they would incur by joining in.\(^\text{20}\) Moreover, a stable climate system might not actually be a compulsory public good for a wealthy, high emitter, who could conceivably insulate himself effectively from the worst effects of climate change for some time to come.\(^\text{21}\) In general, then, this good might be compulsory over the long term for human beings as a species (barring ‘after earth’ science fiction scenarios), but not (yet) for each individual human being.\(^\text{22}\)

Second, we might say that the class of high-emitters use up more than their fair share of the earth’s resources (i.e., atmospheric carbon resources), so that future generations will be left with less than their fair share.\(^\text{23}\) Those leading carbon-neutral lives do not leave fewer resources to future generations, and so fairness requires me to join in doing what all of us collectively ought to be doing. However, this argument casts our responsibilities in the wrong light. As Cullity says, if we imagine an analogous case, such as a fundamentally racist society, then “the complaint against racists is that they are mistreating people; it is not that they are unfairly leaving the burden of not mistreating people to non-racists”.\(^\text{24}\) Analogously, this argument makes it look as if what is wrong with not joining in is that it unfairly leaves the burden of not mistreating future generations to others, rather than that mistreating future generations is unjust.

Third, we might say that what is lacking is effective regulation of the global economy, which would require the collective action of most, if not all nation-states. In the absence of such collective action, we might ask what we ought to be doing to make this more likely. As Cullity

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\(^{18}\) This is an application of Hart’s ‘principle of fair play’. See H. L. A. Hart, "Are There Any Natural Rights?,” *Philosophical Review* 64, no. 2 (1955): esp. 185; 90-91. In Cullity’s discussion, a good seems to be compulsory simply because there is no choice whether or not one consumes it. However, a good might also be compulsory because no rational person could possibly refuse it. Only the first sense is in play in Cullity’s discussion. But the second sense might offer better support for this kind of argument.


\(^{20}\) This also assumes that either high-emitting individuals continue to emit at current levels, or that they become totally carbon neutral. A third option here would be a trajectory of steadily reduced emissions over time, but which does not lead to carbon neutrality. However, given concerns with non-linear tipping points, the practical differences between the second two options might not be significant for the present discussion.

\(^{21}\) There are obviously temporal limits to this line of thinking, for at some stage unaddressed climate change will drastically affect even those who are most able, relatively, to adapt to it.

\(^{22}\) It is less clear what to make of the intergenerational aspect of this argument, namely that we might be free riding on public goods that are compulsory for future generations, even if not yet for ourselves.

\(^{23}\) This argument is similar to “fair shares” arguments made by Shue and others.

\(^{24}\) Cullity, "Acts, Omissions, Emissions."
says, "[i]f the lifeboat is not being launched, I should not simply walk off the beach; I should see whether I can gather a group to launch it. And if rowing the lifeboat in a circle will shame the others into joining in, then I should do that. By leading carbon-neutral lives, we can send a political signal that makes effective global regulation likelier. So we ought to do that, and I ought to join in rather than leaving the work to others". But, as Cullity points out, carbon-neutrality cannot be a requirement for membership in such groups. For, although "persuasive advocacy does often involve modelling the behaviour you are trying to encourage others to adopt", I cannot be required to join such a group unless it can be shown that the "most effective kind of advocacy group ... makes [carbon neutrality a] requirement of its members". However, even if carbon neutrality cannot be required of me by participatory derivation, this does not defeat the general obligation of trying to make effective collective action likelier. That is, I might still be required to join together with others in groups that encourage effective responses to climate change, just as I am required to try to gather together a lifeboat crew. Indeed, as we shall see shortly, it is telling that Cullity does not pursue this line of thought any further.

Cullity's fourth positive argument starts with the premise that those leading carbon-neutral lives are preventing harm to vulnerable people both now and in the future, at small cost to themselves. Although this argument involves some indeterminacy in what constitutes a great benefit or a small cost, there are clear cases in which this requirement is uncontroversial, such as rescuing a drowning child from a pond, at the cost of getting wet. However, as Cullity says, in the case of climate change this argument could only work by calculating the "expected value of the action, the cost (to each member) of performing it, and the centrality or remoteness of its causal contribution".25 Given the difficulties that such a calculation would involve, this is also unpromising.

Perhaps, then, what is wrong with our contributions to climate change is that we are joining in with collective actions that we ought to avoid. The intuition for negative participatory derivations comes from an example in which someone joins in with a gang assaulting someone. But instead of directly harming the victim, this person simply keeps a lookout for police. As Cullity says, we can still hold this person responsible because he freely chose to participate in the assault by going along with the demands of the other gang members. Analogously, then, we freely choose to participate in the collectively wrong action that is climate change. However, this line of thought is also problematic, because in the gang example there is collusion between the aims of the gang members. Here, the collective becomes an agent because there is an "interlocking structure of intentions and reasoning through which the members combine their agency".26 But climate change is not analysable in these terms, because there is "no grand global agent coordinating its actions towards the deliberate end of worsening the climate. My own dispositions of thought and action are not structured towards the production of that outcome".27

In the light of these failures, Cullity is eventually forced to look for a weaker account of culpable negligence or recklessness. Along these lines, he claims, it might be wrong for us to collectively behave in a manner that negligently or recklessly causes climate change. If so, my individual participation in this collective behaviour is wrong, and my behaviour forms part of a collectively

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
negligent behaviour. But even this argument fails, because the complaint against the individual here is "that they direct their agency in a way that fails to take account of its potentially harmful effects". However, this claim similarly requires the existence of an agent who acts negligently. 

And, as Cullity says, this is just "what is absent in the case of global climate-impairing behaviour".\(^2^8\) At best, then, we can say that I must do what I can to "promote cooperation on the scale required to address the problem", and that I can be blamed for not banding together with others to form a collective agent when it was clearly within my (and our) power to do so.\(^2^9\) This result does not even depend upon the presence of collective agents, for there can be ethically bad collective actions without coordinated group agency (such as a riot). If I participate in a collective action of this sort, I can still be held to account, as someone may challenge me on why I chose to join in. And this complaint holds up even when I do not participate in any of the harms associated with the action, but simply go along with others.\(^3^0\) However, Cullity claims that the question 'Why did you join in?' has no application to climate change, because one cannot avoid contributing, so there is no sense in which one can either join in or opt out.\(^3^1\) But if so, this argument also fails.

Now, it is noticeable how often these arguments falter because they are unable to find either an intentional action or an agent undertaking it. However, this is strange if we recognise that Cullity's main example, living a carbon-neutral life, could never be plausibly construed as an action. It is rather a general structuring of behaviours (i.e., a lifestyle) that are mostly habitual and unintentional. Even when an action of the relevant sort occurs in a carbon-neutral life, this would presumably be something like a decision to coordinate one's behaviours (say, of energy use) with an intention to minimise one's reliance on fossil fuels. But this would then settle back into a regular, habitual pattern of behaviour. And if so, we appear limited to considering those moments of decision that might make a person's life carbon-neutral, because these can be the only place where intentional actions aimed at minimising one's contribution to climate change might conceivably be found.

The essential problem with this approach is contained in the analysis of action, and especially in the assumptions about moral agency that it presupposes. In Cullity's discussion, as in most others, we are still talking about why "an action is morally wrong and why it matters".\(^3^2\) This conception of an action is at the heart of many discussions of collective action and collective responsibility. For instance, Brian Lawson's recent treatment of collective wrongdoing asserts in typical fashion that “[i]ndividuals are responsible for collective wrongdoing insofar as they intentionally contribute to harmful collective goals or outcomes”.\(^3^3\) Moreover, Lawson claims that “[o]ur ability to hold different contributors responsible to different degrees is explained by variations in the extent to which we are warranted in describing their actions as intentional

\(^{2^8}\) Ibid.

\(^{2^9}\) This claim borrows from Virginia Held's argument about collective responsibility where a "random assortment of individuals" exists, rather than a collective agent, but where it was possible and morally required for the individuals present to band together and form one.

\(^{3^0}\) For in this case, as Cullity says, "I have aligned myself with [the] destructive actions" of the group, and "oriented myself towards its violent behaviour".

\(^{3^1}\) Although this claim is true as far as it goes, we might wonder about perpetuating a problem once it has been recognised, even if we did not cause the problem in the first instance. Perpetuation in this sense might plausibly count as 'joining in' after all. I will return to this thought below.

\(^{3^2}\) Cullity, "Acts, Omissions, Emissions."

contributions". However, this analysis of action seems to be conceptually inapplicable to indirect, highly mediated phenomena like climate change. Although the energy-intensive lifestyles of most people in wealthy nations are a leading contribution to climate change, a lifestyle cannot count as an action in the relevant sense. And this is a large problem for thinking about who is responsible for climate change. Not only is it difficult to identify any collective agents, it is also difficult to identify any actions of the relevant sort, because neither entire ways of living nor the consequences that follow from them count as actions.

III.

At least in discussion of climate change, these difficulties should encourage a departure from the usual, Kantian assumptions informing many discussions of collective responsibility. A promising alternative, which I will explore in what follows, is Iris Young’s theory of collective responsibility for structural injustice. For Young, structural injustice is “produced and reproduced by thousands or millions of persons usually acting within institutional rules and according to practices that most people regard as morally acceptable”. The current and potential harms caused by climate change seem to be clear instances of structural injustice in Young’s sense, since climate change involves inflicting harm on many discrete individuals over a long period of time, and since these harms result from the unintended consequences of an enormous set of behaviours.

Young notes that in many instances of injustice, causal contribution is an important aspect of making an argument for individual responsibility, because there is a direct contribution from particular agents to the causing of harm. However, in cases of structural injustice, establishing responsibility on the basis of the causal contribution of individuals is often very difficult, because although we may identify individual agents that contribute to the processes which bring about the injustice, it is generally “not possible to identify how the actions of one particular individual, or even one particular collective agent, such as a firm, has directly produced harm to other specific individuals”.

As we have already seen, this is an important difficulty with causal accounts of individual contribution to climate change. Even if it is in principle possible to trace the greenhouse emissions of one individual, it is not possible to trace a causal link between one’s personal emissions and the infliction of climate-related harms on others. And, although it has become common for individuals to work out their ‘carbon footprints’, the intent here is to show what one’s relative contribution to a total set of emissions amounts to. This is why per capita comparisons are made between one’s individual carbon footprint and national or regional

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34 Ibid. See also David Killoren and Bekka Williams, "Group Agency and Overdetermination," ibid.
36 Young, Responsibility for Justice [Electronic Resource], 95.
37 Ibid., 96. For Young, this shows that approaches to responsibility for injustice framed in terms of one’s moral or legal liability for the injustice are limited. This is because on such views attributions of responsibility function similarly to those of legal liability. In both cases, “we must be able to show that they are causally connected to the harm in question and that they acted voluntarily and with sufficient knowledge of the consequences”.
averages. Moreover, it is not possible to say that the emission of some small amount of carbon is in itself harmful, but only that it becomes so when certain natural thresholds have been eclipsed.38

Structural injustices are typically brought about when individuals each behave according to existing social norms and accepted practices. But, as Young points out, if this is so, then “[n]one ought to be blamed for that outcome... because the specific actions of each cannot be causally disentangled from structural processes to trace a specific aspect of the outcome”.39 Rather than finding fault with individuals, Young claims that “individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes”.40 Thus, Young’s theory grounds collective responsibility in common membership in a society:

“As I understand it, a shared responsibility is a responsibility I personally bear, but I do not bear it alone... The ground of my responsibility lies in the fact that I participate in these structural processes that have unjust outcomes. These processes are ongoing and ought to be transformed so that they are less unjust. Thus I share with others the responsibility to transform these processes to reduce and eliminate the injustice they cause. My responsibility is essentially shared with others because the harms are produced by many of us acting together within accepted institutions and practices, and because it is not possible for any of us to identify just what in our own actions results in which aspects of the injustice that particular individuals suffer”.41

This involves a significant departure from most discussions of responsibility for injustice. Indeed, Young characterises these discussions as primarily ‘backward-looking’ because they seek to identify culprits who are to blame, and so responsible for an injustice. Instead, Young’s theory is not based on finding fault with individual actors, but is ‘forward-looking’ because it aims at the transformation of existing structural processes. Of course, this is not to suggest that there cannot be particular individuals or groups who are to blame for structural injustices. Some people will certainly have contributed more than others, just as some people will have been in a greater position to influence the production of unjust outcomes. However, Young claims that we do not need to find these culprits in order to take responsibility for the unjust outcome that is collectively produced. On this view, even if we cannot find fault with the individual actors who bring about a structural injustice, we would still bear a shared responsibility to address structural injustice by virtue of our community membership. As Young says, everyone who contributes in some way to the production of injustice “shares some responsibility for those harms”. Young’s theory of collective responsibility is primarily about how shared responsibility can make sense when a collective problem exists, but when it is not possible to attribute this problem to particular moral agents. Thus, we can speak about a type of shared responsibility even when the usual conditions of moral agency cannot be met.

Perhaps, then, philosophers have been unable to find good arguments for responsibility for climate change because they have been looking at them through the wrong theoretical lens: the

38 Thanks to Andrew for this point.
39 Young, Responsibility for Justice [Electronic Resource], 100.
40 Ibid., 45.
41 Ibid., 110.
lens of Kantian moral agency.\textsuperscript{42} When we attend instead to how attributions of responsibility function in practice, it is easier to see what collective responsibility for climate might actually mean. That is, that we stand in a relationship to one another involving mutual recognition of claims of justice. On this view, individuals would contribute to climate change primarily as members of collectives. The ongoing benefits which membership in a community confers on individuals, such as common identity and culture, or the opportunities to pursue worthwhile and meaningful lives, imply that even when individuals do not bear much causal responsibility for structural injustice as individuals, they nonetheless bear some responsibility as members of a community which collectively produces injustice. As Young says, "a shared responsibility is a responsibility I personally bear, but I do not bear it alone".\textsuperscript{43}

We can get a clearer view of what this view of collective responsibility amounts to by considering how such an attribution would work in practice. Suppose I grant that I am responsible for climate change, as part of a collective that produces excessive greenhouse gas emissions. So are you, and so is every other member of the community that collectively contributes to climate change. Now, I have already said that such an attribution does not automatically imply blameworthiness on my part. Indeed, it is hard to see how this could be straightforwardly blameworthy at all: on a Kantian view, none of us is apparently freely willing or intending to bring about this outcome; on an Aristotelian view, our contributions cannot really be classified as voluntary since there is little or no option to do otherwise. Moreover, the vast majority of historical contributions to climate change have occurred under conditions of excusable ignorance. But, as we have seen, in cases of structural injustice it is not necessary to find blameworthy agents in order to make attributions of responsibility.

Nonetheless, I am required to do something when I am involved in the production of a structural injustice, especially one of the scale and severity of climate change. As we have seen, Young claims that we are (or ought to be) mutually responsive to the appeals of others when an injustice arises. To bring this more clearly into view, Young provides the following example of someone living on the verge of homelessness because of widespread property speculation. As Young says:

"Vast numbers of actors contribute to the processes that produce this outcome, many of them with little awareness of how their actions contribute. Landlords jump at a lucrative offer to sell the buildings they have had difficulty maintaining. Cities cultivate the developers who want to renovate them because they want to attract business investment and upgrade their image with bond investors. Young affluent professionals move back to the centre of the city to be close to work and entertainment. Lower-income renters compete for units, contributing to patterns of housing demand that rebound on all of them in the form of higher rents".\textsuperscript{44}

Now, none of the individual actors here is flouting existing social norms or practices. Moreover, it is hard to see why any of them should be blamed for their conduct, or for the result that is collectively produced. Nonetheless, those involved do seem to bear some kind of responsibility

\textsuperscript{42} Marion Smiley has urged abandoning the presumption that these are the "standards of moral responsibility per se", rather than simply the "standards of one particular notion of moral responsibility that we do not necessarily have to accept". See her "From Moral Agency to Collective Wrongs: Re-Thinking Collective Moral Responsibility," \textit{Journal of Law and Policy}, no. 1 (2010): 186.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Responsibility for Justice [Electronic Resource]}, 110.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 99-100.
here to redress the injustice that has occurred as a result of their collective behaviour. Indeed, Young claims that our responsibility “derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects. Within these processes, each of us expects justice toward ourselves, and others can legitimately make claims of justice on us”. The purpose of this attribution of collective responsibility is not to find fault with individual actors, but to bring out a kind of responsibility that derives just from our membership in a community. We are required to contribute to collective action aimed at righting collectively produced wrongs, not because we stand in some kind of individual causal relationship to them, but because we belong to the collectives that produce them.

Contrast this with the sorts of argument that we explored above, which tried to derive individually wrong actions from some kind of contribution (whether actual or expected) to a collective problem. As we saw, Cullity claimed that there are “facts about what we ought to do and your actual or potential participation in our doing it, independently of the effects of your individual action or inaction”. Along with Cullity, then, we can say that “the relations in which we stand to others provide us with reasons... [and] that our treatment of others should be justifiable in the light of those reasons”. On the view I have been urging, the relations in which we stand to others are those of a shared community whose members have a mutual interest in the claims of justice. However, from this position we do not need an account of individual wrongdoing to justify collective action. Collective action is a requirement on us simply because we are members of communities that cause unjust harms to others.

IV.

As should be clear, by grounding a requirement to respond to a collective problem in common membership in a community, we have moved from an individualist account of responsibility to a collectivist one. However, this move requires some defence. Indeed, Simon Caney has argued that a focus on collectives could only be justified by overcoming two significant obstacles. First, we would need to provide a general argument for preferring a collectivist approach, which showed “when and why it is accurate to say that a collective caused an environmental bad and hence that that collective must pay”. Further, this argument must show “why this description is better than a more individualistic one (individuals a, b, and c polluted, and so individuals a, b and c should pay)”. Second, we would need to avoid the apparent unfairness which a focus on collectives seems to involve. As Caney says, if we adopt a collectivist approach, we seem to be unfairly holding responsible some individuals who would have strongly objected against the decisions made at the collective level. And such individuals might reasonably complain “that they were not consulted; they did not vote; they disapprove of the policies and, as such, should not be required to pay for decisions that others took”.

The first of these obstacles is actually quite easy to overcome. Following the account given above, we can say that climate change is a harm produced by the structural processes of entire

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45 Ibid., 105.
46 Cullity, "Acts, Omissions, Emissions."
47 Caney, "Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change."
48 Ibid., 760.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
communities, and the complex interactions between these at a global scale. Given the sheer complexity and scale of the factors which cause climate change, a causal account at a greater level of generality will be explanatorily preferable to one that is reducible to the causal contribution of each individual person, which is surely too difficult to produce. However, Caney’s second point is more difficult, for there does seem to be some unfairness in holding current members of a nation-state responsible for the effect of decisions made by others, especially if those members might have strongly disagreed with those decisions. Although I have claimed that in such cases common membership is the ground of collective responsibility, there does seem to be some unfairness involved in looking to membership instead of individual causal contributions when some members of a collective actively oppose the efforts of others to address the problem.

The first thing to note here is that it is actually impossible to avoid all unfairness in talking about responsibility for climate change, because this is a problem which unfairly burdens the present generation by requiring them to pay for the actions of their predecessors, which were necessarily undertaken without their consent. But this is just a consequence of the temporal structure of climate change itself, since the harms from current emissions are visited on future generations.\(^{51}\) There will therefore always be an element of unfairness whenever the present generation decides to respond. For, although most of the causal contributions to climate change happened in the past, until recently climate change was not recognised by many people to be a severe threat to the future.

Unfairness seems to be a problem whether one adopts an individualist or a collectivist standpoint. As Caney himself argues, the most advantaged people seem to have a duty to bear the burdens of climate change in proportion with their wealth, while the impoverished do not, even though the advantaged might not be causally responsible for the problem. Caney claims that while it would be unjust to require the impoverished to pay, it would also be monstrous to let climate change go unaddressed, given the scale of harms that are predicted if we were to do so. Thus, Caney claims that “[i]f the choice is of either ascribing duties to the poor and needy or allowing serious harm to befall people (many of whom are also poor and needy) or ascribing duties to the most advantaged it would seem plausible to go for that third option.”\(^{52}\) However, if this is conceded, it is not obvious why it would be any more unfair to hold collectives such as nation-states responsible for climate change despite the opposition of some of their members, than it would be to hold some wealthy individuals more responsible for climate change even though qua individuals they bear little more causal responsibility than others, and even though they are effectively overcompensating for the vast majority of causally responsible individuals who are no longer alive.

Indeed, it is no longer clear that Caney’s argument is about responsibility at all, rather than benevolence or beneficence. For, as Caney says, “there is, we can agree, an unfairness involved in asking some to compensate for the shortcomings of others. The question is: how should we best respond to this? My suggestion is that we respond best... by seeking to minimize those demands and by asking the privileged to bear this extra burden.”\(^{53}\) However, asking the virtuous


\(^{52}\) Caney, "Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change," 771-72.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 772.
to bear an extra burden is not the same as holding them responsible for causing injustice. The former amounts to a plea for a morally excellent response. But the purpose of Caney's discussion was supposed to be getting clearer about who is most responsible, and hence who should pay. Indeed, even on a purely causal account, it seems less unfair to ask nation-states to pay for climate adaptation and mitigation measures than it is to ask individuals to pay, because nation-states can be attributed a causal role in contributing to climate change which extends all the way back to the beginning of the problem. Moreover, nation-states, unlike individuals, can actually be said to have benefitted from their past emissions (where they have), because even if these had not occurred, it is at least possible that the same nations would currently exist.

More generally, too, there seems to be something exaggerated in raising unfairness as an objection against burdens which a generation might recognise for problems that it did not cause, but finds itself perpetuating. For instance, the abolition of slavery could in this sense be claimed to be an unjust burden on the generation who managed to abolish it, because this generation did not actually decide to capture slaves, but found themselves already perpetuating the problem by the time they could consider its justifiability. The point of our concern with unfairness instead seems to be relative to the contribution of others: we want to know not only whether imposing a burden on some group is unfair relative just to that group's contribution, but also, and perhaps more importantly, whether it is unfair relative to the contributions of others who could also do something about it.

There is an additional reason to think that the challenge of individual unfairness is not overly problematic. Consider a situation in which a collective ought to be responding, but is not. As many have noted, it is clear that this is indeed our current situation with respect to climate change. Despite all the warnings we have heard over the last twenty years, we are still on a dangerous emissions trajectory. Nonetheless, when collective action is required, but is not undertaken, individuals might be ethically blameworthy for not doing more to bring it about. Stephen Gardiner has recently explored this line of thought.54 Gardiner argues that even though it is proper first of all to blame this failure on the leaders and institutions that bear the authority to respond to climate change at the political level, this does not mean that individuals are not also blameworthy. As Gardiner says:

"Suppose it is true that humanity simply lacks the appropriate institutions to deal with global environmental change. What follows? If political institutions normally operate under delegated authority from the citizens, the answer seems clear. This is a case where the delegation has either not happened or has failed to be successful. How do we think about this? Again, there is a natural answer. If the attempt to delegate effectively has failed, then the responsibility falls back on the citizens again, either to solve the problems themselves or, if this is not possible, to create new institutions to do the job. If they fail to do so, then they are subject to moral criticism for failing to discharge their original responsibilities".55

Recognising that an attribution of responsibility, and even blame, to individuals for collective failures might seem unfair, Gardiner responds by claiming that this point is "often made in mainstream arguments about rights of civil disobedience, revolution, and the like... The whole

55 Ibid., 54.
idea that citizens might be politically responsible for the behaviour of their institutions is in some respects a radical and demanding one."\(^{56}\) Indeed, according to Gardiner, we are "simply not used to thinking about what our responsibilities are, how demanding they might be, and the role they already play in justifying contemporary social life. Climate change brings these matters into sharp relief. But it does not create them."\(^{57}\)

One plausible explanation for these expanded responsibilities is our common membership in political communities. For such a relationship requires each member to be open to appeals of justice from other members. Nonetheless, as Young says, this sort of shared responsibility can "be discharged only through collective action".\(^{58}\) This claim also holds true in practice in the case of responding to climate change, given the insignificance of individual or even uncoordinated group actions. When collective action is not undertaken, even if this is because of institutional failures or failures of delegated authority, individuals ultimately bear a kind of moral responsibility to create such action. And they can be blameworthy for not attempting this, even though they are not blameworthy in the first instance for bringing about the problem.

An upshot of this discussion is that it accords with widely held judgements about which nation-states should be considered most responsible, and hence should be required to bear a greater proportion of the costs of adaptation and mitigation. Many have thought that wealthy nation-states, and the largest historical emitters, should be required to bear more of these costs, and that the greatest contributions of all should come from those nations which have been both the largest contributors to climate change and the largest beneficiaries from their historical emissions.\(^{59}\) But this conclusion also follows from the causal aspect of structural injustice. Because responsibility for collective injustice is grounded in membership in a political community, and because political communities exist over longer periods of time than the individual members which constitute them at any point in time, a nation-state that has been responsible for a larger share of emissions in the past will be responsible even when these were produced innocently. In this case it would be plausible to say that there is a collective injustice without individual wrongdoing. But if responsibility is grounded in membership along with causal contributions to a harm, there is no reason to object to requiring historically high-emitting nations to contribute more to climate change mitigation and adaptation. And this is even more so given that most historical high-emitters also make up the wealthiest, and hence the most potentially effective contributors to mitigation and adaptation measures.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{57}\) Ibid. Gardiner also claims that "the fact that the move seems startling to many contemporary readers may itself be a consequence of a certain vision of modern political justification", according to "the role of social and political institutions is to discharge as many ethical responsibilities as possible for the citizenry".

\(^{58}\) Young, Responsibility for Justice [Electronic Resource], 105. Young (p. 111) adds that "[t]housands or even millions of agents contribute by our actions in particular institutional contexts to the processes that produce unjust outcomes. Our forward-looking responsibility consists in changing the institutions and processes so that their outcomes will be less unjust. No one of us can do this on our own".


\(^{60}\) There are further questions lurking here, which I must pass over. For there are at least two promising lines of argument which support the imposition of stronger requirements on historically high-emitting nations, namely an egalitarian argument that historical high-emitters have used more than their fair
A question that remains is what is to be done when some of the nation-states that should be contributing more decide to shirk their responsibility. Should nation-states be prepared to invest in mitigation and adaptation (whether this is domestic, regional, or global), only in proportion to their actual contributions to the problem? In a completely just world, perhaps, it would be possible to hold to this conclusion, because every actor would be doing what is required of them. However, given that failure to address climate change is neither a serious policy option nor an ethically acceptable one, if some nation-states choose to shirk their responsibility by failing to comply with efforts to address climate change, then it simply must fall to others to do more in their stead. As Caney points out, this would be somewhat unfair to nation-states that are willing to do what is right, but the right reaction to being treated unfairly would be for them to “take this up with non-compliers and not to react by disregarding the legitimate interests of those who would otherwise suffer the dire effects of climate change.”

A further criticism of most accounts of collective responsibility for climate change is that they are of little practical value. In addition to their focus on overly technical specifications of action, guilt, and responsibility, such discussions are often silent, sometimes naively so, about how effective change can be achieved in practice. It is therefore a further advantage of my approach that responsibility has been conceptually separated from blame at the collective level. In this way, we are not limited in talking about post-1990 emissions, unlike accounts that are focused primarily on causality and blame, which must ignore the vast majority of causal contributions to climate change that occurred before 1990. Moreover, we need not show, as proponents of ‘Beneficiary Pays’ approaches must, that any benefit has been gained in order to justify a claim of collective responsibility. Although, if it is clear that an entity has benefitted from its emissions, this should bolster its proportion of responsibility relative to other contributors. Indeed, it seems to be practically important that blame is not conceptually required, and hence part of the vocabulary, of the parties involved in climate change negotiations. For it seems to be important that discussion of compensation from wealthy nations to poorer nations who are most at risk from climate-related harms steer well clear of attributions of blame.

This is especially important given recent efforts by the UN to establish the Green Climate Fund, which is intended to redistribute money from wealthy nations towards the adaptation and mitigation measures required by poorer nations. This fund seems to be inspired in part by a spirit of solidarity with nation-states that will be most severely affected by climate change, and which are least able to fund the measures required to counter it. In light of the ‘forward-looking’ approach to responsibility discussed here, I want to add that we see contributions to this fund, and other similar contributions, largely in a positive light, not as compensation to make amends for a past wrong, but compensation based on recognising the past, and present contributions of nation-states to an intergenerational, intragenerational, but largely unintentionally produced injustice. While there is space for compensation by nation-states, and other significant post-

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61 Granting of course that in a completely just world, this problem would have occurred at all; I lack strong intuitions one way or the other here.
63 My thanks to Robyn Eckersley for this point. See Robyn Eckersley, "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities Towards 'Climate Refugees'," in Climate Change and Justice, ed. Jeremy Moss (Cambridge University Press, (Forthcoming)).
1990 contributors which does involve a sense of blameworthiness, this need not be the standard way of looking at the meaning of compensation for climate change. And if we grant that the greatest percentage of contributions to climate change occurred under conditions of excusable ignorance, it cannot be. Those nation-states who have benefitted most from their historical emissions should also contribute most to these global efforts, only not in the spirit of wrongdoing, or benefitting from a past injustice, but in the spirit of solidarity with those now vulnerable to the harms they have unwittingly produced.

We must be open-minded about the ethical significance of responses to climate change. For neither wrongdoing nor restitution for unfairly benefitting is automatically implied by either compensating vulnerable nation-states, or by investing in effective mitigation measures. The point I want to emphasise here is that the spirit of solidarity that seems to underlie contributions to initiatives like the Green Climate Fund will not only be practically important in ongoing diplomatic negotiations between nation-states, but will be important in motivating the citizens of wealthy nation-states to maintain pressure on their national leaders to reach regional and global agreements. Although in one sense this is will be an unfair burden for the present generation to meet, this does not mean that we should not try to meet it.

Conclusion

At the end of his discussion, Cullity says that it would be rather depressing to concede, as I have here, that our relation to the harms associated with climate change is, at least for pre-1990 emissions, a collectively produced problem without individual wrongdoing, "since if it is true that may make it harder for us to motivate ourselves to address this problem properly". However, it does not seem true that we would undermine the motivation of individuals to work collectively to address collectively produced injustice if it turned out that none of those individuals were blameworthy. As Cullity notes immediately after raising this concern, we might still have good reasons for limiting our contributions to climate change "as an expression of concern for what is happening to the world. After all, it would be bad enough to deserve the disdain of future generations for having worsened the world we leave them, whether or not we also deserve their blame for having wronged them". Indeed, thinking in these terms already appears to be a powerful motivation for most people, who care a great deal about what sort of world will be left for their grandchildren. Moreover, if the next few generations of human beings can respond to this threat by avoiding the worst impacts of climate change, then this would be to our immense and lasting credit in the eyes of those who follow us on this planet.

References


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64 Neither is it in strict liability.
65 Cullity, 23. This line of thought is associated with Sinnott-Armstrong.
66 Cullity, 23-4.
Conclusion

I began this project by looking into the conceptual links and tensions between neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and environmental ethics. Although this form of virtue ethics had fallen into disfavour among environmental ethicists, I was seldom convinced by the reasons given for this. Thus, in each of the chapters contained in Part I, I argued for a re-orientation of environmental philosophy around a revised conception of value and human life. By making the question, ‘How should one live?’ the primary ethical question, I suggested that we could be motivated to live excellent and environmentally sensitive lives. In an age of looming environmental crisis, I claimed that part of what makes any human life excellent now would be a recognition of environmental values. This argument showed how eudaimonistic ethics could indeed provide the basis for a robust environmental ethic.

In response to the concern that environmental values might be prone to a worry with relativism, I argued via consideration of Rachel Carson that environmental exemplars are exemplary not only to those with particular environmental commitments, but to all of us. While this discussion took seriously the concern with the novelty of environmental considerations, and the potential for inter-cultural disagreement, I claimed that any reflective conception would have to include at least some environmental virtues. In this way, the cultivation of environmental virtue, and the recognition of environmental value, become general requirements on anyone wishing to live a good life. While this might seem to introduce a tension between human and environmental values, I argued that this tension is not evident in the lives of environmentally admirable people. Moreover, I argued that the illusion of such a tension is fostered by a particular conception of value that we have good philosophical reasons to reject.

Given that my interest in this research had been spurred by understanding how ordinary ways of living can create collective environmental crises, in Part II my thoughts turned to more substantive questions. I argued that reflection on consumer habits, coupled with social and institutional support, could encourage a change in how many in wealthy societies live at present. Such a change is motivated by strong psychological and environmental considerations, but the problematic behaviours that make up consumer lifestyles are largely habitual. Given this, I argued that reflection on our habits, and on their contribution to our lives, is an important route to living better, less environmentally destructive lives. I also argued that some intellectual habits are important obstacles to living well and sustainably. I claimed that the habits associated with climate skepticism are ultimately irrational because they require selectively ignoring shared epistemic standards in one area that are typically taken to be important in most other areas of life, even by climate skeptics.

Connected to these habits is the problem of self-deception concerning large-scale problems. Taking climate change as my primary example, I argue that many people appear guilty of this kind of self-deception. This is not only a serious moral issue for individuals, but has even more serious consequences when it becomes a collective response to unpleasant or demanding information about the world. In the final chapter, I explored a sense of collective responsibility for climate change that did not rely upon either blame or causation. Instead, I claimed that we are collectively responsible for some outcomes even if no one is individually to blame for them, because we belong to communities that collectively produce them. By looking at our shared
responsibility for climate change in these terms, I argued that a more robust and motivating conception of responsibility is available.

At the same time, these issues also raise broader questions that I have been unable to tackle here. For instance, problems associated with certain lifestyles and habits raise questions about the social and political framework that encourages their formation. In the case of modern overconsumption, we might wonder about the prospects of de-coupling economic growth from consumption spending, which has been a dominant economic driver since the Second World War. If this is indeed what is needed (a question that is clearly open), there would be a pressing need for new work on alternative economic theories and institutions.

As this thesis is primarily a work in ethics, I have spoken a great deal about the character and the reasoning of individuals. However, environmental problems are almost without exception collective action problems requiring political solutions. Climate change is at once the most obvious of these, but also the most difficult to address. The failure of democratic states to address climate change over the past twenty-five years must raise questions about the health of our modern political institutions. Furthermore, the state of public discourse throughout this period has shown a worrying absence of concern for truth or justification. Linked with the marked absence of scientific literacy among both voters and politicians, these trends present serious challenges to the democratic ideal of rational, evidence-based policy formation. These topics, which range across normative ethics, social epistemology, and political theory, strike me as vital for future research.