

Ioana Mohandpurri

Is Virtue Ethics an Effective Ethical Theory to Deal with the Environmental Dilemmas that we Face in Modern Society?

J? This thesis will examine contemporary Virtue Ethics, evaluating its use as an ethical theory, particularly in its effectiveness in dealing with ethical problems regarding the environment. Consequently, the value of Virtue Ethics will be judged on its practical merit: can living in a way that cultivates good moral character lead to actions that will effectively identify, judge, and deal with the environmental problems that we are all faced with, whilst not worsening or creating human inequality. I mention this last part regarding equality, because the climate issue is also a humanitarian issue, and the inequalities between people should not be overlooked or sacrificed when addressing environmental issues.¹ This thesis seeks to determine whether Virtue Ethics is the best suited ethical theory to navigate this.

The first area to be examined is Environmental Ethics, an incredibly relevant ~~and~~ topic dealing with pressing issues in modern society. To do this, we shall look at Environmental Ethics since the 1970s, to understand how modern Environmental Ethics has evolved. Until the 1970s, philosophy dealt very little with environmental problems. Since then, as awareness of the harmful effects of human activity towards the environment increased,² these issues began to be discussed in more depth by philosophers. Now, especially with growing climate concerns,³ environmental issues have been more present on the ethical agenda and have evolved into a variety of views. For example, there are those who approach the issues from an anthropocentric perspective, and those who have an opposing biocentric view, but all these views generally recognise that there is a need to consider the environment, even if the motives behind these considerations vary. ✓ Good

Crucial to this discussion is understanding how dominant Western views interact with the natural world. This relationship between humankind and nature that is required for an effective approach to environmental ethics clashes with the dominant Western view.⁴ Under the general Western ethic that society lives by, some actions are classed as permissible even though they cause harm to the environment.⁵ Given that concern for the environment is integral to life on Earth, there is a need to look at the accepted ethical systems that we live by, and adjust, or completely reformulate them.⁶

The second area relevant to this thesis is Virtue Ethics, which is rooted in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics⁷, although it has been developed since then to be acceptable for contemporary moral thought.⁸ This approach relies on the concept of virtues and their opposing vices. It is about practicing the virtues, whilst avoiding acting in accordance with the vices.⁹ Virtue Ethics supposedly does not give explicit instructions on how to act in particular situations, though some believe it gives guidance on which course of action would be carried out by a virtuous character, thus is the preferred course of action.¹⁰ This is often presented as a weakness, however I will explore whether the converse is true. This arguably gives the theory a subtlety and flexibility that is necessary for dealing with the nuances of morality. The nature of this subtlety is that we are told what we ought to

Good presentation

¹ Dower, Nigel, 'Robin Attfield: Changing the Ethical Climate on Climate Change', in *Creation, Environment and Ethics*, ed. by Humphreys, Rebekah, and Vlacos, Sophie (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 13-32, (pp. 24-30).

² Attfield, Robin, *Environmental Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) pp. 36-38.

³ United Nations, "Direct existential threat' of climate change nears point of no return, warns, UN chief", UN News, 10th September 2018, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1018852>> [Accessed 25th Sep. 2019].

⁴ Sylvan, Richard, "Is There A Need For A New, An Environmental, Ethic?", in *Environmental Philosophy*, 4th ed. ed. by Zimmerman, Michael E., Callicot, J. Baird, Warren, Karen J., Klaver, Irene J., Clark John (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2005), pp. 16-24, (pp. 16-17).

⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 17-22.

⁷ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Ross, David (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

⁸ Hursthouse, Rosalind, *Humans and Other Animals* (Oxford: Alden Press, 2000), p. 172.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 172-173.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 173-174.

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consider, leaving the final decision and action up to us based on what we deem fit for the circumstances.¹¹ Indeed, to not have this element of subtlety would be an oversimplification of moral decisions.¹²

Overall,

this thesis will ask whether the approach Virtue Ethics provides, over utilitarianism and deontological ethical theories,¹³ is the best suited approach when dealing with environmental issues. Is Virtue Ethics the best approach to guide action on Environmental Ethics? To answer this, Virtue Ethics will be compared to other mainstream ethical theories, to establish if it is the most suitable. Furthermore, Virtue Ethics will be put to the test in a series of hypothetical environmental problems. By doing this, it will be established whether or not it is a fitting theory to be used in dealing with Environmental Ethics.

V. good. Concise, yet quite thorough. You've packed a lot into a small number of words, presenting a proposal that not only evinces understanding of the background debates & the arguments at stake, but which promises to provide an interesting & scholarly critique of relevant normative stances & ethical theories.

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¹¹ Ibid., p. 175.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 171.

Bibliography

1. Attfield, Robin, *Environmental Ethics* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

This book provides an overview of Environmental Ethics and addresses many of the issues that this thesis will deal with. For example, the use of resources and sustainable development (pp. 138-172) and responsibility to future generations (pp. 101-133). It also touches upon environmental theories and their use in tackling environmental problems (pp. 45-53) and what is of particular use is that this section briefly addresses Virtue Ethics (pp. 46-49). Another section of particular use will be the discussion of "The Emergence of Environmental Ethics in the 1970s" (pp. 36-38), as this concisely sets the scene of Environmental Ethics.

2. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Ross, David (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

This book provides the origins of Virtue Ethics, so is necessary to understand the theory.

3. Dower, Nigel, "Robin Attfield: Changing the ethical climate of climate change" in Humphreys, Rebekah, Vlastos, Sophie, *Creation, the Environment and Ethics*.

Dower writes on Attfield's view of an ethical approach to climate change, and the need to treat the issue of climate change in conjunction with other humanitarian issues, such as poverty (pp.24-30). Dower also explores Attfield's position on different principles to manage the carbon budget and what each entail regarding moral responsibility (pp. 14-23). Dower goes further than just discussing these positions, arguing that effort from both the state and from individuals is necessary to achieve what needs to be done, whether that be achieving the targets set out by the Kyoto agreement (p 15-19) or taking on the responsibility of global emissions as a high polluting country, removing the burden from developing countries who have contributed to emissions less (pp. 20-25).

4. Hursthouse, Rosalind, *Humans and Other Animals* (Oxford: Alden Press, 2000), p. 172.

This book dedicates a section to discussing Virtue Ethics in application to animal ethics, which heavily overlaps with Environmental Ethics (pp. 170-184).

5. Sylvan, Richard, "Is There A Need For A New, An Environmental, Ethic?", in *Environmental Philosophy*, 4th ed. ed. by Zimmerman, Michael E., Callicot, J. Baird, Warren, Karen J., Klaver, Irene J., Clark John (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2005).

This text is invaluable in understanding the tension between our current Western ethic, and the needs of the environment. It highlights issues that our current ethical system neglects, thus calling for it to be altered or a new one formulated (pp. 17-22).

6. United Nations, "Direct existential threat' of climate change nears point of no return, warns, UN chief", *UN News*, 10th September 2018, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1018852>> [Accessed 25th Sep. 2019].

This article outlines the very real threat posed by Climate Change.

Well-researched annotated bibliography.

